

NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY SERIES

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

S. K. BOSE



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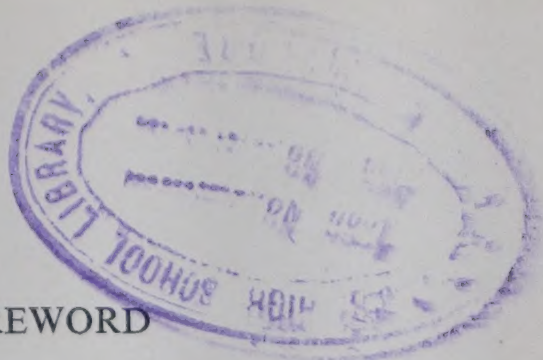
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FOREWORD

THIS COUNTRY has produced remarkable personalities in every walk of life since the earliest times. Our history is crowded with names of outstanding persons who have made notable contributions whether in art, literature, politics, science or other fields. Some are household words. There are many whose names are familiar but about whose life and work little is known to the public. There are others about whom people know little but who have made remarkable achievements.

The history of a country is, to a great extent, the history of its great men and women. They have moulded it and built it up. It is essential for the ordinary citizen to know something about these personalities in order to understand how our country has evolved.

In this book Shri S. K. Bose has outlined the life and activities of one of the most remarkable Indians of the 19th century and a great pioneer in the field of social reform. The times in which Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar lived and worked were days of a great social upheaval. Since then social evolution has passed through many phases. Today if we look back at the history of the last hundred years, we can understand what a great inspiration that simple, sage-like Pandit provided to the new social movement. He is one of the landmarks of the cultural history of India during the 19th century.

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I. FACING THE DILEMMA

THE 19th century was a period of great reawakening in India. It was a time when the different spheres of Indian life became instinct with a new spirit mainly as a result of a stimulating contact with the West. Conscious efforts started being made to lift the country out of the rut into which she had fallen. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of those great men who made the most significant contributions to their country's resurgence during this period. Social reform, including educational reform in a broad sense of the term, generally precedes political reform. That is what happened in India's case. Vidyasagar chose for himself the social-cultural field for his activity and in the process prepared the ground for the later political awakening.

The life-story of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is a saga of a simple but determined soul who went through a ceaseless struggle and sacrifice in the cause of social and educational progress. There was in him a quality of heroism which invested his efforts with a rare grandeur.

Those were stormy days when animating contact with the West was inducing a drastic revaluation of values. The ancient traditions of Hinduism were being subjected to a severe scrutiny by a newly awakened scepticism generated by western knowledge and culture. Many lost their head and were driven to excesses. On the other hand, the ancient traditional faith was trying to hold its ground and would not allow the new light to penetrate its walls. Vidyasagar was born at that crucial period when the action and interaction between scepticism and faith was making

the atmosphere pretty difficult. Vidyasagar neither lost his head in the contemporary turmoil, nor recoiled into the shell of the old tradition. Combining in himself the passion of a rebel and the patience of a reformer, he took up the challenge and in the process gave a new dimension to progressive social thought. If Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first modern man of India, as Panikkar says, Vidyasagar was in many ways his lineal descendant. He had a rare quality by which he could rise spontaneously above the circumstances of his orthodox birth and upbringing to lead the van of progress and enlightenment.

In the field of education too one could see his breadth of vision. Belonging to the ancient tradition of learning, he did not shun or shut out the light from the West. In framing his blueprint of education, he tried to synthesize the eastern learning with the western. He was a mass educator. He believed that without the diffusion of education and enlightenment among the people, there could be no progress in society.

The name of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar has, across the century, become a byword for progress and personality, catholicity and compassion. Everywhere in Bengal he is lovingly called 'Vidyasagar'.

Ishwar Chandra's early biographical details have been supplied by himself in his incomplete Bengali autobiography.

He was born in a village called Birsingha in the Midnapore district of Bengal. An obscure village in a remote corner of the country is hardly the place for the birth of a hero. Yet history's inscrutable hands often bring out great promise and greater fulfilment from mud huts and modest hamlets. Ishwar Chandra was born in the humble

cottage of a poor Brahmin in the Birsingha village on September 26, 1820. The story goes that even before his birth, an astrologer had predicted his future greatness. Likewise when after his birth his horoscope was cast, it was found that he would be a great man while being obstinate like a bull-calf.

The family was a Kulin Brahmin (high caste) one specializing in Sanskrit learning and proud of its ancient cultural heritage. Ishwar Chandra's grandfather, Ramjoy Tarkabhushan, originally belonged to the Banamalipur village in the Hooghly district. But a man of strong will and independent spirit, he had a quarrel with his brothers and in a pique, set out on unknown wanderings leaving his wife, Durga Devi, to eke out a miserable existence near her father's house in Birsingha. The poor Brahmin was a man of a lofty character, and that was the most valuable gift he could leave behind as a legacy for his illustrious grandson.

Durga Devi continued to live in utter poverty along with her children. When about 14 or 15, her eldest son, Thakurdas Bandyopadhyay, decided to go to Calcutta in search of a living. He had to struggle hard to find a footing in Calcutta's alien atmosphere.

The city of Job Charnock was then bustling with life. Lord Wellesley had built it up as a city of palaces. It was a glamour city, the favourite seat of our foreign rulers. Any man would like to come to that hub of activity to try his fortune. A smattering of English was then a high road to success. Thakurdas picked up some English and started earning his livelihood beginning with an income of Rs. 2 per month. He was greatly helped in his struggle by Bhagabat Charan Singha, a friend of his father's and his

Calcutta host. When about 24, he married Bhagavati Devi, and Ishwar Chandra was their first child.

Bhagavati Devi was a lady of an extraordinary character. She was progressive in her ideas. Her qualities of catholicity and compassion were remarkable indeed, and it was largely from her that Ishwar Chandra inherited these qualities.

The child whose future greatness had already been foretold was restless, precocious and promising. He was full of pranks and would tease his parents as well as neighbours. Even beating and scolding, as he himself confesses in his incomplete autobiography, could not make him amenable to discipline. But that restlessness was also a sign of his extraordinary merit. Ishwar Chandra finished his *pathsala* course with an astonishing speed—in three years only. This amazed everybody, including his teacher, Kalikanta Chattopadhyaya, who suggested that Ishwar Chandra should be taken to Calcutta for English education.

Accordingly they set out on an auspicious day in November 1828—Thakurdas, Kalikanta, Ishwar Chandra and a servant called Anandaram—for the exciting city of Calcutta. It was a long trek of about sixty miles, a weary way to be covered on foot and in three days' time. But it was also a trek from the old world to the new, from the outworn past to the emerging future. At places the child had to be carried on back. But Ishwar Chandra was a child prodigy. On the way he did a miracle. There were milestones on the road bearing English numerals which Thakurdas, at the child's importunity, explained to him. And lo, before they reached Calcutta, the child had mastered the English numbers.

At Calcutta they received shelter at the house of Bhagabat Charan who however was no longer alive. His son, Jagatdurlav, and his widowed daughter, Raimoni, received them warmly. Vidyasagar never forgot Raimoni and her rare affection throughout his life. Her early widowhood must have left a deep, distressing impression upon his budding mind.

For a short period Ishwar read at a local *pathsala* to qualify himself fully for higher studies. Then the question arose what type of education—English or Sanskrit—was to be imparted to him.

This poser was inherent in the contemporary situation itself. The fierce controversy then raging between the Anglicists and the Orientalists was symptomatic of the country's divided mood. But then the demand for English education was rising, while oriental education was clinging helplessly to its declining status. Initially the East India Company did not feel itself responsible for public instruction. Gradually when the Government started taking interest in the matter, it began by patronizing oriental education, as instanced by the setting up of the Calcutta Madrasah and the Sanskrit College at Benares. But English was already coming up. There were eminent Englishmen who wanted the spread of English education. Elphinstone for instance urged the dissemination of English and European sciences as early as in 1823. Meanwhile through the efforts of the missionaries like the Serampore group and Alexander Duff and philanthropists like David Hare, English education and the hankering for it were spreading. The first great Anglicist among the Indians was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who not only advocated English education but protested, in his letter to Lord

Amherst in December, 1823, against the introduction of an unmixed Sanskrit system of education. His protest however went unheeded—the Calcutta Sanskrit College was established in 1824.

But the Hindu College started in 1817 by respectable Hindu citizens of Calcutta, with the aid of well-meaning foreigners like David Hare, was serving as the nursery of western learning and also of revolt. The banner of rebellion was raised against Hindu orthodoxy by the young Eurasian rebel patriot and teacher, H.L.V. Derozio, and his youthful adherents known as Young Bengal. On the other hand, the fort of conservatism was being held by the orthodox sections headed by Hindu celebrities like Raja Radha Kanta Deb and his organisation, the Dharma Sabha.

The controversy whether the education imparted should be western or eastern raged roughly between 1822 and 1835. It was set at rest only with the Government's acceptance of Macaulay's famous minute of 1835 in which the "great object" of the British Government in India was stated to be "the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India." The die was thus finally cast in favour of English education. Ishwar Chandra's boyhood was spent amidst the din of this historic controversy, and it certainly did a good deal to influence the growth of his opinions and outlook.

But contrary to the emerging intellectual trend, Thakurdas decided in favour of Ishwar receiving Sanskrit education with a view to his taking up his hereditary profession of teaching in *tols* and *chatuspothis*—a fulfilment Thakurdas had to deny himself because of his dire family needs. It was also decided that Ishwar should join the Sanskrit

College which offered the additional opportunity of passing the Hindu Law Committee's examination for appointment as a Hindu Law Officer in any court of judicature.

So in June 1829 Ishwar Chandra was admitted to the Government Sanskrit College at Calcutta. The Sanskrit College and the Hindu College were housed in two wings of the same building representing as it were the two different worlds of learning, eastern and western, and it was Ishwar Chandra's life-long endeavour to build a bridge between the two.

How rigid and caste-bound society was those days can be seen from one striking fact. The Sanskrit College was meant only for the boys of the Brahmin and Vaidya castes. This was obviously in deference to the traditional belief that our ancient lore was accessible only to the Dwijas or twice-born. The Hindu College was however open to the Hindu boys of all castes but not to Muslims and Christians. Not only that. The two colleges housed in the same building were separated by iron rails to match mental segregation by physical. This senseless caste restriction—restriction on knowledge, in effect—must have pained young Ishwar Chandra very much ; for, one of the first things he did while being in authority at the Sanskrit College was to do away with this caste discrimination.

During his twelve years' stay at the Sanskrit College, Ishwar Chandra had a uniformly brilliant career. He earned rich distinctions and received many prizes and scholarships, including those for original Sanskrit composition in both prose and poetry. He also did well in Elementary English which was taught at the College those days. But in 1835, the authorities decided to abolish English as a subject of study at the College. Naturally

Ishwar Chandra could not proceed with that language any further. But his hankering for learning English is evident from the fact that he, along with several other students, made an application to the authorities urging the re-introduction of English.

At the age of 14, he married Dinamonyee Devi in accordance with the custom of early marriage prevalent those days. According to his biographer, Chandi Charan Bandopadhyaya, Ishwar Chandra was not willing to marry at that age. He was rather thinking of devoting his life to education and humanitarian work. It seems that the mission of his life had already dawned upon his young mind in a vague form. But he agreed to marry at the instance of his father.

For three years Ishwar Chandra was in the Grammar class. The formidable task of mastering Sanskrit Grammar must have been apparent even to the highly talented Vidyasagar, although he did it very creditably. Stage by stage he went on studying *Vyakaran* (Grammar), *Sahitya* (Literature), *Alamkar* (Rhetoric), *Vedanta* (Philosophy), *Smriti* (Law), *Nayaya* (Philosophy), *Jyotish* (Astrology) and *Dharmashastra* (Religion) and thus completed his course, with great distinction. During this period he had to do hard work at home ; for, his father could not afford a domestic servant and there were several other persons living with Ishwar and his father at their Calcutta residence. Ishwar had to cook, cleanse the utensils and do other domestic chores. Simultaneously he had to study hard under the strict supervision of a vigilant father. Actually Thakurdas was so zealous about his son's education that he would not hesitate to beat Ishwar mercilessly to make him adequately mindful of his studies.

Possibly this early painful experience made Ishwar Chandra so thoroughly averse to physical punishment for students later in his life.

Life was no bed of roses for Ishwar Chandra. It was a life of hardship and ceaseless struggle, in which the only silver lining was the ambition within and the hope ahead.

In April 1839 Ishwar Chandra appeared at the Hindu Law Committee's examination and thus qualified himself for the post of a Hindu Law Officer or Judge-Pandit whose function was to advise the European judges on Hindu Law matters. He was offered the Judge-Panditship of the Tipperhah district. But since his study was still incomplete, he, at the instance of his father, gave up the offer and went on with his studies at the Sanskrit College. It is to be noted that the title "Vidyasagar" which has earned a country-wide currency was first appended to his name in the certificate given to him by the Hindu Law Examination Committee. Since then he has been known more by this eloquent title than by his Christian name.

He finally passed out of the Sanskrit College in December 1841 after having qualified himself in different branches of Sanskrit learning and having earned reputation as a scholar of an extraordinary merit.

The formative years of a man's life are very important for his future growth. This was particularly so with Vidyasagar. The kind of intellectual and moral dilemma the country was then facing has already been referred to. The impact of western knowledge and culture had created a deep crisis in the static postures of our tradition-bound society, and both reform and rebellion were very much in the air. Pitted against these was the fort of Hindu traditionalism held by the orthodox sections. Broadly

three trends, western infatuation, reformism and staunch orthodoxy, were in evidence. Vidyasagar faced the dilemma like many other intellectually conscious people of that age and chose to steer a middle course, a course that does not shut out the best values of the West from flowing into the country's cultural heritage.

II. BLOSSOMING FORTH

THEN began Vidyasagar's career as an educationist. He was no politician but a builder of the people's morale, and he chose the most effective medium, education.

In December 1841 Vidyasagar entered the Fort William College as the Seristadar or Head Pandit of Bengali. Established by the Marquis of Wellesley in 1800, the College had an important role to play in the development of Bengali language and literature and also in stimulating East-West contact. The College was set up with a view to imparting lessons on oriental languages to the young civilian servants of the Company. It gathered round itself a band of scholars and writers representing oriental languages and literatures some of whom made notable contributions to the Bengali literature. In a two-way traffic, they themselves imbibed the liberalism of the West and in their turn initiated the young Europeans into the beauty and grandeur of oriental literatures and philosophy.

At the Fort William College, Vidyasagar earned the appreciation of a number of prominent Englishmen, notably, Capt. G.T. Marshall, Secretary to the College, who came to have a great admiration for him. "The more he came in contact with the Pandit, the more was he charmed with his keen intellect, profound knowledge, bold and persistent spirit, untiring energy and above all his excellent character" (*Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar as an Educationist*, Brajendranath Banerji, *Modern Review*, September, 1927). Under the inspiration of Capt. Marshall, Vidyasagar started learning Hindi and English. The story is told that Vidyasagar's eagerness to learn English did not abate even

later in his life. Evidently his mental identification with Sanskrit by heritage as well as by education did not prejudice him against English, a foreign tongue. On the contrary, his close association with the Europeans at the College widened his mental horizon and stimulated his inherent reforming zeal.

In April 1846 Vidyasagar was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Sanskrit College, the nursery of his boyhood days, on a salary of Rs. 50 per month. The certificate Marshall gave him spoke eloquently of his many-sided qualities, particularly of "his tact and intelligence and freedom from all bias and unworthy motives." One wonders, if Vidyasagar had a premonition that all might not go well with his new job at the Sanskrit College. He saw to it that his brother, Dinabandhu Nyaya-ratna, was appointed in his place at the Fort William College. Possibly he had thought that in case he had trouble with the Sanskrit College authorities, his brother's income could be depended upon for family maintenance. That is exactly what happened.

With his passion for reforming Sanskrit education, which was then cast in an old, stereotyped mould, Vidyasagar prepared a blueprint and submitted it to the Secretary to the Sanskrit College, Russomay Dutta. This blueprint was commended by Marshall himself. But possibly the Secretary did not like to act upon his assistant's scheme. He, in any case, did not implement it except in minor details.

Vidyasagar's main purpose in formulating the scheme was to rationalize Sanskrit education, combine it with English education and thus equip the alumni of the College for useful work in the educational sphere. But the Secretary's

studied indifference caused him great disappointment. This was the first time that he met with opposition in the fulfilment of his task, and the natural obstinacy in him asserted itself. He felt that if he could not do anything useful for his *alma mater*, he would not stick to a mere money-earning job. Consequently in July 1847, he resigned his post, contrary to the advice of his friends and well-wishers. It called for a great courage of conviction to give up a job worth Rs. 50 per month those days. Secretary Dutta wondered how Vidyasagar would maintain himself once out of job. But Vidyasagar is said to have retorted that he would live by selling vegetables. Such was the indomitable spirit of the man.

Vidyasagar faced unemployment with courage and calmness. At Calcutta he had a big household to maintain with a number of persons living with him. Besides he had to send money to his father whom he had earlier induced to retire from service and live in his village home. But Vidyasagar was undaunted. Possibly anticipating trouble, and also as a preparation for his literary career, he had meanwhile started, in collaboration with his friend, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, a printing press known as Sanskrit Press. He had also started a book selling shop named Sanskrit Press Depositor. About this time appeared his first published Bengali book, *Betal Panchavinshati*, in response to the demand for a suitable Bengali textbook for use at the Fort William College.

But his self-chosen unemployment ended when, in March 1849, he once again entered the Fort William College, and this time as Head Writer and Treasurer.

After some time an opportunity came to him to go back to his *alma mater*, and this was a turning point in his

career. The Professorship of Literature having fallen vacant at the Sanskrit College, Dr. F. J. Mouat, Secretary to the Council of Education and a great admirer of Vidyasagar, offered him the post on condition that he would be given the executive powers of a Principal. As a matter of fact, the College had no Principal till that time but a Secretary and an Assistant Secretary. But now the two posts were to be amalgamated into that of Principal. On being appointed Professor of Literature on December 5, 1850, Vidyasagar was asked by the Council of Education to draw up a report on the working of the Sanskrit College and suggest measures for its improvement. He submitted the report and, in appreciation thereof, he was appointed Principal on January 22, 1851 on a salary of Rs. 150 per month with the full authority to conduct the affairs of the College according to his own plans of reform.

Thus Vidyasagar entered the most creative period of his life. His all-round personality began to unfold itself in many directions. He was not doing just one thing at a time but several things simultaneously. In other words, his constructive genius was branching out in a many-sided efflorescence.

Maharshi Devendra Nath Tagore, father of Poet Rabin-dranath Tagore, started his progressive *Tattwabodhini Sabha* and *Tattwabodhini Patrika* respectively in 1839 and 1843. With his own liberal bent of mind, Vidyasagar was almost instinctively drawn to these. He was on the editorial board of the *Tattwabodhini Patrika* and closely connected with the Sabha, an organization of Brahmo persuasion. For a time he was its Secretary. He was already in the field of social reform. John Drinkwater Bethune, well-known promoter of female education in this

country, found in Vidyasagar a zealous fellow-traveller in the noble cause of promoting women's education. Vidyasagar's career thus started unfolding itself in several directions. He had initiated educational reform with the Sanskrit College as his base. He now involved himself in social reform. He was doing useful literary work by writing and editing books. Side by side, another aspect of his character was revealing itself—it was his unbounded compassion flowing out in many-sided humanitarian work. Vidyasagar was fast becoming *Karunasagar* or the 'ocean of kindness', as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the first great poet of Bengal's literary renaissance, called him.

Vidyasagar's blueprint on the reorganization of the Sanskrit College brings out his aims in education and his forward-looking views. Well aware of the difficulty of mastering Sanskrit Grammar, Vidyasagar suggested its simplified learning through the mother tongue for which purpose he himself wrote *Upakramanika* and *Vyakaran Kaumudi*. He envisaged the study of western Mathematics through the mother tongue and suggested the acquisition of adequate knowledge of western Philosophy by the students of the Philosophy class. He also suggested the compulsory study of English.

Armed with the support of the Council of Education, Vidyasagar went on making large-scale changes in the syllabi and system obtaining at the Sanskrit College. One of the first things he did was to remove the caste taboo on admission to the College. He introduced admission and monthly fees, till then non-existent, to make the students serious about their study. He made the study of English compulsory and introduced modern Mathematics. He enforced discipline by insisting upon regular and punctual

attendance, till then neglected, on the part of both the teachers and the taught.

There are some interesting stories about this. The teachers were habitually irregular in attending the college. But many of them had been Vidyasagar's own teachers at the same College of which he was now the Principal. So Vidyasagar felt shy of admonishing them for their unpunctuality in deference to their age and seniority. He therefore adopted a novel method. He would not utter a single harsh word. He would simply watch for the arrival of the defaulting teachers and, as soon as he would find them arriving late, accost them with the simple question : "Have you come just now ?" Thus the delinquent teachers would be shamed into mending their ways. But one teacher, Jainarain Tarkapanchanan, was incorrigible. He would not come in time in any case. Vidyasagar adopted a slightly different technique. Day after day he would stand at the gate waiting for the late coming Jainarain. He would utter not a word but simply keep standing there for the unpunctual teacher to notice him. The moral impact of this method was so great that Jainarain promised to come in time.

Under Vidyasagar's enlightened stewardship the Sanskrit College prospered.

In the year 1853 however a situation arose which might as well develop into a crisis for Vidyasagar but fortunately did not. Though pleased with Vidyasagar's work, the Council of Education still invited Dr. J. R. Ballantyne, Principal, Benares Sanskrit College, to report on the working of the Calcutta Sanskrit College. While generally appreciating Vidyasagar's work, Ballantyne made certain other remarks which are important, not so much in themselves as because of the replies they evoked from Vidyasagar.

Ballantyne suggested that his own simplified *Abstract* of Mill's *Logic*, in which he had tried to show its terminological correspondence with the Indian *Nyaya* system, should be introduced into the course. But Vidyasagar rejected the suggestion on the ground that the students should be encouraged to read original books. He also opposed Ballantyne's suggestion that Bishop Berkeley's *Inquirer* should be prescribed for the Philosophy class. He argued that Berkeley had reached almost the same conclusions as *Sankhya* and *Vedanta* which, however sacred they might be to the Hindus, were not sound philosophy. Therefore, he further argued, it would be useless to teach the students an English version of what they had already been learning through Sanskrit.

Ballantyne was rather inclined towards the old world of Indian scholasticism but Vidyasagar was not. He was progressive, forward-looking and keen to imbibe new light from the West. In this context he strongly denounced the traditional Indian scholars, saying that "it was a hopeless task to conciliate the learned of India to the acceptance of the advancing science of Europe." He said : "They (the learned of India) are a body of men whose long-standing prejudices are unshakable. . . . They believe that their Shastras have all emanated from omniscient Rishis and therefore they cannot but be infallible. . . . We do not require to get them reconciled because we do not require their assistance in any shape—we need not fear the opposition of a body declining in their reputation."

One more point stressed by Vidyasagar was of great importance. What was needed at that moment was mass education and the students of the Sanskrit College equipped in both English and Sanskrit were best fitted to light

the torch of knowledge among the people. That is how he felt. He said : "The natives of Bengal appear to be very eager to receive the benefit of education. . . . Let us establish a number of vernacular schools, let us prepare a series of vernacular class books on useful and instructive subjects. Let us raise a band of men qualified to undertake the responsibility of teachers, and the object is accomplished."

This episode brings out Vidyasagar once again as a rationalist, humanist, mass educator and crusader against superstition and bigotry. He would not hark back to the past, however glorious that past might have been, but welcome the new light of the future to assimilate it with all that is great and abiding in the country's cultural heritage. His main purpose was to create a system of education which might take up the challenge of the new and emerging age. It could by no means be exclusively Sanskrit or exclusively English but a judicious combination of both.

Initially inclined towards the Ballantyne line, the Council of Education however accepted Vidyasagar's point of view and allowed him freedom to follow his own course. Not only that. His salary was raised to Rs. 300. The College went on prospering. Topmost British officials came to have a high regard for Vidyasagar. He also earned the esteem of the aristocratic Bengal as well as of the rising Bengali middle class.

During the years 1853-54, Vidyasagar did some literary exercises of importance. He edited Madhvacharya's *Sarvadarshan Sangraha* for the Asiatic Society and also *Raghuvansham* and *Kiratarjuniyam*. He published his essay on Sanskrit language and literature. He also wrote his *Vyakaran Kaumudi* and *Shakuntala*.

Another important event of this period was his starting a free school at his native village, Birsingha. He not only bore the entire cost of the school but provided free boarding and lodging to about 30 students at his residence. The humanitarian aspect of his character was blossoming forth. The great compassion was flowing out in different channels towards removing human misery and ignorance.

Meanwhile certain striking changes took place on the educational scene. Early in 1854, the newly formed Board of Examiners replaced the Fort William College, and Vidyasagar became one of its members. Following the Education Despatch of 1854, a Department of Education took the place of the Council of Education with Gordon Young, an inexperienced civilian, as Director of Public Instruction. Vidyasagar's relationship with him did not eventually turn out to be happy. When a committee was formed to consider the question of the establishment of universities, Vidyasagar became one of its members. He also became a Fellow of the Calcutta University when it was formed in 1857.

III. LIGHTING THE TORCH

ONE of the great aims of Vidyasagar's life was the spread of education among the masses. He had taken upon himself the important mission of dispelling the darkness of ignorance from among his countrymen. Even before he had become the Principal of the Sanskrit College, the passion for spreading education had surged in his soul ; it took complete possession of him with his assumption of the Principalship of the College.

Ever since the Government's acceptance of Macaulay's Minute as the basis of the educational policy, English education had come into the focus of official attention. But the vernacular and for that matter vernacular education were relegated to the utmost neglect. Yet it was a fact that the uplift of the masses of the people must depend ultimately upon the improvement of vernacular education. Nobody was more conscious of this patent, though neglected, fact of national reconstruction than Vidyasagar who was an ardent advocate of the spread of elementary education through the mother tongue.

During the period when Vidyasagar was still at the Fort William College, Governor-General Lord Hardinge felt interested in the spread of elementary education through the mother tongue. In consultation with Marshall and Vidyasagar, he set up 101 *pathsalas* or elementary schools in the Bengal, Bihar and Orissa region. Known as Hardinge schools, these institutions however did not succeed for various reasons, including the lack of suitable teachers and textbooks.

The idea was revived after the lapse of about 10 years. The successful experiment by Mr. Thomason with the expansion of vernacular education in the North-Western Frontier Province induced the Government of India and, at its instance, the Bengal Government to give the idea a fresh trial. And this once again brought Vidyasagar to the forefront of the scene as a mass educator.

In his note on the Ballantyne report, Vidyasagar had passionately pleaded for starting vernacular schools, producing vernacular text books and raising a band of teachers for those schools. His ideas on education were therefore already before the Government.

The initiative this time came from the Government of India, and that was in 1853. The person who took up the cause in right earnest was F. J. Halliday, first as a member of the Council of Education and then as the first Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, to which position he was appointed in 1854. An ardent admirer of Vidyasagar, Halliday sent a minute to the Government of India proposing the establishment of a network of model vernacular schools with provision for periodical inspection thereof. Evidently at the root of the scheme the idea was Vidyasagar's, for to his minute Halliday appended a memorandum drawn up by Vidyasagar giving out the details of the scheme. Halliday not only signified his general approval of the scheme prepared by "the energetic and able Principal of the Sanskrit College" but also suggested that this "uncommon man", that is, Vidyasagar should be personally entrusted with the implementation of the scheme of establishing a network of model schools. Indeed in Halliday's estimation Vidyasagar's services were essential to the successful implementation of the scheme.

But how could it be possible to enlist Vidyasagar's services while he was still the Principal of the Sanskrit College from which position he could not obviously be spared ? In other words, how could he hold dual charge ? Various suggestions were made, for instance, associating him with the periodic inspection of the proposed schools, appointing him a temporary Inspector of Schools, and so on.

Meanwhile, William Gordon Young, a raw and inexperienced civilian, was appointed Director of Public Instruction in the changed educational set-up and that made a lot of difference.

Ultimately Halliday's insistence on enlisting Vidyasagar's services in a regular way prevailed, and Vidyasagar was appointed Assistant Inspector of Schools in May, 1855 and later Special Inspector of Schools for South Bengal. This new assignment was in addition to Vidyasagar's duties as Principal. He started drawing an additional salary of Rs. 200, his total emoluments amounting to Rs. 500.

Vidyasagar took up the challenge of ignorance with a missionary zeal. The first thing that struck him was the absence of suitable teachers. He therefore started a normal school for teachers' training with a vernacular school then attached to the Hindu College as its nucleus. Vidyasagar thus took upon himself a three-fold responsibility—to look after the work of the Sanskrit College, to guide the normal school and to establish a chain of model vernacular schools in the districts in his charge. It was only his remarkable capacity that could enable him to face this triple task successfully.

During his college vacations, he used to go far out into the rural areas establishing model schools and looking after their working. In every district in his charge, he established

five model schools and thus there were a total of 20. The villagers caught up with the new spirit of education and cheerfully bore the costs of the school buildings. Vidyasagar went on moving tirelessly from village to village in palanquins or on foot, little caring for his health or physical comfort. The sad history of the Hardinge schools was in the background, and he was determined to make his own model schools a success. Working like a dedicated soul, Vidyasagar thus laid the foundation of a system of vernacular education in Bengal. This system has undergone many changes since then. Its base has broadened immensely today and is broadening still. But the social imperative for vernacular education was his creation. It was he who built its foundation more than a hundred years ago when the light of education was dim.

During these rural tours, Vidyasagar would completely identify himself with the people, becoming one of them as it were. He would minister to their needs with money and otherwise. With increasing income, his charities had also increased, and his purse-strings were always open for the needy and the distressed. Vidyasagar had become a name to conjure with. Wherever he went, people flocked together to have a respectful look at that man of unbounded benevolence.

Vidyasagar would not rest. His store of idealism was inexhaustible ; so was his passion for education. The spread of vernacular education among boys could not give him complete satisfaction. He had already started making ventures into another field of educational expansion, namely, female education. Soon enough a situation arose in which he found an opportunity to launch an all-out drive for the spread of female education.

What David Hare had done for the education of boys, J. E. D. Bethune did for that of girls. Although isolated efforts for educating girls had been made before, it was in fact Bethune who laid the foundation of female education in Bengal. The girls' school started by him in 1849 and named after him became the rallying point of the expansion of female education. In his missionary zeal for emancipating the women of Bengal from the darkness of ignorance, Bethune had the unstinted support of progressive individuals like Vidyasagar, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar and others. Indeed Vidyasagar became Honorary Secretary of the school in 1850.

Bethune's death in 1851 was a great shock to Vidyasagar. But it only made him more dedicated to Bethune's cause and to Bethune's institution. The Government having taken over charge of the school, a committee was appointed to manage its affairs under the Presidentship of Cecil Beadon, then Secretary to the Government of India. Vidyasagar devoted himself wholeheartedly to the welfare of the institution. On the carriages and palanquins belonging to the school he got inscribed a verse from *Manusamhita* purporting to say that, like the son, the daughter too is entitled to careful training and education. This was intended to rouse public consciousness about the necessity of female education. Vidyasagar nursed the institution with great care and was associated with it till the dissolution of the committee in 1869.

Sir Charles Wood's Education Despatch of 1854 gave support to female education. This created a new hope of improvement of this long-neglected domain. Lieutenant-Governor Halliday took a personal interest in the matter. As regards Vidyasagar, he wanted to take up the thread

where Bethune had left it and carry it into a wider field. On a verbal order from Halliday, he started setting up girls' schools (1857-58) even as he had started model schools for boys in the districts in his jurisdiction. And this he did in anticipation of Government approval and aid.

Unlike boys, girls' education was a difficult and a delicate sphere. Here Vidyasagar had to face stiff opposition. Age-old superstition had kept female education under an irrational taboo and condemned women to an ignorant existence within household precincts. In that static society, women were made to wear a permanent brand of backwardness and inferiority. To fight against that entrenched prejudice was no easy task.

But Vidyasagar was a firm believer in the necessity of female education and considered it indispensable to social progress. He would not only set up girls' schools wherever possible but also go on propagating among the people the manifold blessings flowing from enlightened womanhood. In this noble task, Vidyasagar had to face a good deal of criticism, opposition and indignity. The orthodox sections of the society denounced Vidyasagar's efforts saying that female education would lead to the degradation of womanhood. They heaped calumny on Vidyasagar's head. But undaunted, Vidyasagar went ahead trying to bring about a positive awareness in the society about the vital necessity of promoting female education.

Vidyasagar thus went ahead with the establishment of more and more girls' schools, fully confident that the Government would take responsibility for the newly started institutions. Between November 1857 and May 1858, he helped set up as many as 35 girls' schools with 1,300

students on roll. These schools were free, and in most cases, the local people bore the cost of buildings. Nevertheless Government grant was necessary to defray the recurring expenses. After establishing each school, Vidyasagar used to inform the new Director of Public Instruction of the fact and ask for Government grant. But although Wood's Despatch of 1854 had supported female education and even suggested grants-in-aid for the purpose, the Government of India refused to help the newly started schools by modifying its grant-in-aid rules in their favour. It showed a supreme indifference towards the cause of female education by saying that it would be better not to have such schools at all in case adequate voluntary aid was not forthcoming. This was a tremendous shock to Vidyasagar who felt that the lamp he had lighted in rural Bengal would go out leaving the area of darkness darker still. Besides he had made himself personally responsible for defraying the expenses of the schools to the tune of about Rs. 3,500 which, in the event of Government grant not being available, he might have to pay himself.

Vidyasagar's repeated appeals failed. Halliday was sympathetic but helpless in view of the Government's stiff stand. He even suggested that Vidyasagar could sue him in the court for the realisation of the money. But Vidyasagar was too noble a man to do so. The Uprising of 1857 had cost the exchequer a lot, and the Government was not prepared to loosen its purse-strings even for a noble cause. Ultimately the Government agreed to come to the aid of Vidyasagar to the extent of reimbursing him for the expenses till then incurred. But it showed no better enthusiasm for furthering the cause.

What a great disappointment it was for Ishwar Chandra

can be easily imagined. But he was again not the man to yield to adverse circumstances. He started a public fund for helping the institutions to survive—a fund to which not only prominent Indians but even high Government officials like Cecil Beadon and even Lady Canning, wife of the then Governor-General, contributed.

The cause he stood for was no doubt halted for the time being. But by his uncompromising fight against the prevailing prejudices about female education, he created a new enlightenment in the society and set up an imperishable landmark in the country's educational and social progress.

An episode, though chronologically a much later one, calls for mention if only to show that impetuous even though Vidyasagar was about his contemplated reforms, he did not however allow his enthusiasm to run riot with his inborn sense of realism. Miss Mary Carpenter, a friend of India and philanthropist, came to this country towards the end of 1866 and became closely acquainted with Vidyasagar. Interested in the rapid expansion of female education in India, she suggested to the authorities that a normal school for training women teachers should be set up at the Bethune School. Naturally Vidyasagar's opinion was sought. But this time it was a contrary opinion that he gave. Vidyasagar said that with all his burning zeal for the cause, he could not commend the project, because it might be going too far against the tide of public opinion and might thus end in a failure. The contemporary society was so blindly tradition-bound that nobody, he felt, would agree to send his grown-up female ward to receive teacher's training. Vidyasagar was anxious that a noble cause should not be lost through indiscreet over-enthusiasm. Because he was keenly interested in women's education, he wanted

to pursue it cautiously. Vidyasagar's foresight proved correct. The normal school was established but did not thrive.

Another episode in Ishwar Chandra's life, and an unhappy one at that, is linked with Miss Carpenter's presence at Calcutta. At her request Vidyasagar used, at times, to accompany her on her visits to girls' schools at different places. On one occasion, he was accompanying her to Uttarpara Girls' School. The two were in separate carriages while proceeding from Bally to their destination. On the way, Vidyasagar's carriage met with an accident and was overturned. Vidyasagar sustained serious injuries and fell down unconscious. Later in life he recollected the motherly affection with which Miss Carpenter had nursed him back to consciousness. But the fall from the carriage caused so serious an injury to his liver that he never again recovered from its effect.

IV. IN THE WIDOWS' CAUSE

THE greatest achievement of Vidyasagar's life was the legalization of widow remarriage. Even if he had done nothing else to claim credit for, this single act of benevolent radicalism would have earned him an undying distinction.

Social reform in modern India may be traced back to Ram Mohan Roy who has rightly been called the father of modern India. It was he who was instrumental in the abolition of suttee. He again was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj which, for several decades, spearheaded all progressive movements in the country. When these highly important developments were taking place, Vidyasagar was only a boy of eight or nine years, little aware that he was history's favoured child to take up the thread where Ram Mohan had left it.

The social milieu was building up. Actually the problems of enforced widowhood and polygamy which occupied the best part of Vidyasagar's life had already been before the keen and rational mind of Ram Mohan. But possibly he had not enough time to take them up. Later, the Derozians or Young Bengal group took up these problems for a lively discussion. Indeed the educated élite of Bengal were keenly conscious of these social evils, and a sort of a public debate was going on on the question of their abolition.

The Tattwabodhini Sabha and *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, started under the auspices of Debendranath Tagore, were two great institutions of the forties of the last century. Their progressive views were having a tremendous impact

upon educated opinion in Bengal, and the atmosphere of social reform created by Ram Mohan was being strengthened. The Editor of *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Akshay Kumar Dutta, was a confirmed rationalist, a powerful prose writer and Vidyasagar's most faithful ally in social reform.

The *Tattwabodhini Sabha* was an organization of Brahmo persuasion. But Vidyasagar came very close to it and became its Secretary for a time. It was on the pages of the *Tattwabodhini Patrika* that his first tract on widow remarriage appeared. Indeed, according to one of his biographers, he was, by inspiration, a part of the Brahmo Samaj movement, though not in an institutional way. This is a glowing tribute to his liberal sympathies and progressive outlook in the prejudice-bound social background of those days. With Vidyasagar's natural catholicity of mind was joined the liberating force of *Tattwabodhini* progressivism.

Widow remarriage was thus already looming large before the progressive sections of the educated public. Indeed some efforts for getting child widows remarried had been made before Vidyasagar appeared on the scene, but none succeeded due to vehement social resistance.

Vidyasagar stood at crucial cross-roads—waves of radicalism on one side and stolid orthodoxy on the other. It was a hard choice, a choice between progress and reaction, and Vidyasagar opted for the former. He decided to prove that the remarriage of widows had the sanction of the *Shastras*.

There are several anecdotes connected with Vidyasagar's widow remarriage mission. According to one of them, Vidyasagar's mother, herself a lady of remarkable liberalism, suggested this to him, and even his father, though of the orthodox school of thought, encouraged him in the

matter. According to another story, Vidyasagar was deeply moved to see the suffering of a child widow who was his playmate in his village home. A boy of about 13 or 14, Vidyasagar burst into tears on hearing that his child companion was compelled to observe periodical fasts because of being a widow.

But no specific case history was necessary to spur Vidyasagar into action. There were enough widows and enough suffering all-round and then there was the natural zeal for reform stirring in his heart.

The evil of suttee or concremation having been banned, there was an alarming rise in the number of widows. This was particularly because of a peculiar custom prevalent in Bengal which may be called *Kulinism*. In effect *Kulinism* is caste system in a very rigid form. Initially the system was introduced by King Vallasena of Bengal in 12th century A.D. as a mark of personal distinction for the Brahmins. He put the Brahmins in several grades according as they possessed all or some of the nine virtues prescribed by him and gave the rank of *Kulin* to those who possessed all of them. There was then no marriage restriction among *Kulins* and even among *Kulins* and non-*Kulins*. But it was Devibar Ghatak (15th century), one of a class of Brahmins whose function was to guard the purity of the *Kulin* system, who put the *Kulins* into 36 groups and restricted marriage only among the sub-castes of particular groups. *Kulinism* was initially a personal distinction ; but it gradually degenerated into a hereditary privilege, no matter whether the *Kulins* concerned possessed any of the virtues or not. This opened the way for heartless exploitation of women. Since high caste parents had the obligation to marry their daughters into *Kulin* families, the *Kulin*

bridegrooms were very much in demand in the marriage market. This was a golden opportunity for the unscrupulous *Kulins* to carry on a profitable trade in polygamy and all for money. The parents had the customary obligation to marry their daughters before puberty, and when they did not find a suitable *Kulin* match, they would, for fear of social opprobrium, give their daughter in marriage to any *Kulin*, even if he had already had a few dozens of wives. Teenage girls were thus sacrificed in marriage to septuagenarians and octogenarians, who died immediately after, leaving tender widows behind to mourn and suffer throughout their life. The *Kulins* practising polygamy owned no responsibility to support their many wives financially but on the contrary extorted money from the girls' parents for saving them from social disgrace. Pathetic stories of the exploitation of girls are on record. It is said that the *Kulins* used often to marry so many times that they did not know all their wives or could not visit them even once in several years. At one time, one of Vidyasagar's own teachers, Shambhu Chandra Vachaspati, married a young girl at a ripe old age, and Vidyasagar was so much enraged that he promised never again to touch food or drink at his teacher's residence. Needless to say, the teacher died soon after leaving behind one more tender girl to swell the ranks of the widows.

So Vidyasagar was face to face with one of the most cruel social customs in enforced widowhood. It was a human problem of a great magnitude involving life-long celibacy and suffering for tender girls. With untiring perseverance, Vidyasagar delved deeper and deeper into the Hindu scriptures to find a sanction for the remarriage of widows. Being a realist, he did not like to go beyond the

tenets of the Hindu Shastras, for that would be a change far too drastic for the contemporary society ; he wanted to find out a solution within the frame-work of the Hindu Shastras and make it acceptable to the Hindus at large. After deep study and painstaking research, he seized upon a verse in Parasara Samhita on which he built his thesis that in certain circumstances, widow remarriage was sanctioned by the Shastras. Concremation and life-long celibacy are of course highly meritorious, according to Parasara. But at the same time, the remarriage of widows, Parasara says, is permissible "on receiving no tidings of a husband, on his death, on his turning an ascetic, on his being found an impotent or on his degradation." Vidyasagar argued that since *suttee* had been legally banned and since in the *Kaliyuga* it was difficult for women to practise life-long celibacy, the third alternative, marriage, had been prescribed for women in *Kaliyuga*. Therefore the remarriage of widows was in consonance with the injunctions of the Shastras. He also proved with considerable force of argument that Parasara Samhita had its special relevance to *Kaliyuga*.

The thesis, first published in *Tattwabodhini Patrika* and later republished in the form of a tract (January 1855), brought out his great erudition, his remarkable grasp of the subject and his almost unanswerable arguments.

Vidyasagar's book convulsed the orthodox sections of the society. It was a rude shock to them. The conservative class found in it an open challenge to the dominance they had been exercising in the name of religion and Shastras. They tried to hit back with strong counter-arguments. Raja Radha Kanta Deb of Sovabazar, the leader of the then Hindu society, held two open debates at his residence

between Vidyasagar and other Pandits on the admissibility of widow remarriage in the light of the Shastras. In the debates Vidyasagar displayed his magnificent scholarship and forceful arguments. Even the Raja himself could not help being impressed. But unfortunately he sided with the camp of social reaction and went against Vidyasagar's move. In fact most of the help Vidyasagar received in his noble mission was from the Brahmo leaders and from the ranks of Young Bengal. The conservatives under the lead of Dharma Sabha put up a stiff resistance.

It is difficult to imagine at this distance of time the almost tumultuous impact Vidyasagar's book produced on the society. It was an upheaval, so to say. The conservative sections were loud in their denunciation of Vidyasagar as one who was going to destroy the purity of Hindu religion. Books and pamphlets were written galore to prove that the marriage of widows was against the injunctions of the Shastras. Learned opinions against widow remarriage were even purchased. Abuses were showered upon Vidyasagar. In lampoons he was held up to ridicule.

Vidyasagar knew that these people of the learned class, on whose interpretation of the scriptures depended millions of their co-religionists, were not so much concerned with the essence of the Shastras as with blind adherence to irrational social customs. Vidyasagar could well see that what was reigning supreme over the spirit of the Dharma-shastra was blind, senseless, stifling, social custom which had practically negated the true spirit of the Shastras. His humanism was stirred to its depths to see the tyranny of social custom over the true spirit of *Dharma*. It was therefore Vidyasagar's war against the exploitation of women by the socially dominant class. It was a war of

liberation of oppressed womanhood from social tyranny in the name of religion.

In seven days 2,000 copies of Vidyasagar's book were sold out, and a reprint for another 3,000 had to be ordered. Thereafter another 10,000 copies were printed. The impact was no longer confined to the English educated class but spread far and wide, among the masses and even in the remote countryside. Vidyasagar's name was on everybody's lips. Popular songs were composed on the theme of Vidyasagar and widow remarriage. Verses celebrating Vidyasagar's widow remarriage move were woven into the borders of women's *saris*.

Undeterred by vociferous protests and vehement opposition, Vidyasagar came out with a second tract (October 1855) in support of widow remarriage, in which with a remarkable display of scholarship and in a language at once elegant and powerful, he cut across the maze of sophistry built up by his opponents. He did not return abuse for abuse, but paid back his adversaries in irrefutable logic and argument. Before Vidyasagar, Ram Mohan alone had shown such a mastery over the Hindu scriptures in his famous tracts.

In his second tract on widow remarriage, Vidyasagar flays *Deshachar* or social custom mercilessly, saying that it has placed its "feet on the head of the Shastras, pierced through the pith of *Dharma*, blocked all considerations of good and evil, closed the doors of differentiation between what is just and what is unjust". He says further in the same book: "Alas oh Indians ! How long will you sleep the sleep of delusion lying on the bed of bewilderment ! Open the eyes of your sensibility and see how India, your sacred land, is overflowing with the sins of adultery and abortion.....Long

subservience to custom has so vitiated and so confused your intelligence and religious feeling that it is difficult for you to feel in your hard and unsympathetic heart any kindness for the unfortunate widows in their misery or to feel a sense of repugnance at the sins of adultery and abortion flooding the country. You are ready to let your daughters, as dear to you as your own life, burn in the fire ordeal of widowhood, you are ready to support their indulgence in adultery under the influence of irrepressible physical desire, disregarding the dereliction of religion and morality, but simply for the fear of social disgrace, you are ready to abet abortion in their case, thus getting sunk into the quagmire of sin ; but strangely enough you are not ready to save them from the woes of widowhood by getting them married again.....You presume that with the death of her husband a woman's body becomes like stone, that she no more feels sorrow, no more feels pain, that her indomitable physical passions become extinct. But that these presumptions of yours are wrong is being proved and demonstrated at every step.....what a regret it is ! Let no unfortunate, helpless woman be born in a country where the males have no compassion in their heart, where there is no sense of religious righteousness, no rational discrimination between what is just and what is unjust, what is good and what is bad, between virtue and vice, where adherence to social customs is the only religious observance and obligation."

In 1856 Vidyasagar had his two tracts translated into English under the title "Marriage of Hindu widows".

Abuse, vilification and indignity continued to be showered upon him. While walking on the streets, he would suddenly be surrounded by some hostile elements

who would hurl abuses at him.

Even physical assault on him was planned. Afraid, his father sent to him at Calcutta a faithful bodyguard to take care of his personal security, though this was not much to Vidyasagar's liking. He was not a man to be daunted by verbal abuse or physical threat. There was that streak of hereditary obstinacy in him. Obstinacy is not always a lovable virtue. But nowhere was it more gloriously in evidence than in Vidyasagar. In the face of the terrific hostility he stuck to his mission.

But even the two books were not enough, although they were of a radical import on the theoretical plane. Vidyasagar therefore thought of getting widow remarriage legalized ; for, this seemed to him to be the best way of putting it beyond cavil. He arranged to send a petition to the Indian Legislative Council signed by 987 persons, representing the progressive sections of the society, praying for a legislative enactment "to remove all legal obstacles to the marriage of Hindu widows and to declare the issue of all such marriages to be legitimate."

A Bill to this effect was moved in the Indian Legislative Council by J. P. Grant, a member, on November 17, 1855, who referred in the course of his speech to Vidyasagar, "the learned and eminent Principal of Sanskrit College", as "the chief mover of the agitation out of which the Bill had arisen." Grant powerfully argued that the Bill would constitute no interference with religion because it was a permissive law "which could have effect only when those for whose benefit it was intended should choose to avail themselves of it." Sir James Colvile, another member, while seconding the Bill, paid a high tribute to Vidyasagar for his "enlarged views" and "desire for social progress". He

strongly criticised “the monstrous fact of a virgin widow condemned against her will to a life mortification by way of showing duty and respect to a deceased husband whose face she might never have seen except at the hour of betrothal.”

The widow remarriage papers preserved at the National Archives of India and the relevant proceedings of the Legislative Council indicate what a tremendous impact the introduction of the Bill created all over the country. There were many petitions to the Council bearing innumerable signatures both for and against the Bill—more against than for it. There were petitions not only from Bengal but from elsewhere also, notably southern and western India. Grant estimated that “there were upwards of 40 petitions against the Bill signed by 50,000 to 60,000 persons ; in favour there were upwards of 25 petitions signed by more than 5,000 persons.” It is not the majority view that always counts. All reforms are, by and large, initiated by an enlightened minority.

Records show another interesting aspect of the matter. Forty-four native inhabitants of Calcutta petitioned the Council for the insertion of a marriage registration clause in the Bill. This was not done. It was passed as reported on by a Select Committee and received the Governor-General’s assent on July 26, 1856, a red-letter day in the history of Indian social reform.

Vidyasagar could not have been oblivious of the absence of a marriage registration clause in the Bill, which later accounted for the failure of several remarriages. But perhaps he thought it to be too radical for the age. Later when confronted with the failure of many marriages, he veered round the idea of a declaration being signed by the parties.

Now came the question of implementation. For some time naturally nobody came forward to make a venture in widow remarriage. But at last Vidyasagar's indefatigable efforts and energy were rewarded. The first widow remarriage was celebrated under his auspices in December 1856 at the Calcutta residence of his friend, Raj Krishna Bandopadhyaya. The bridegroom was Sris Chandra Vidyaratna and the bride was a 12-year old widow, Kalimati. It created a great sensation all over the city. Apprehending trouble, Vidyasagar had arranged for police protection beforehand. The house where the marriage took place and its neighbourhood were a seething mass of humanity. Most of the people had come out of curiosity to see this unthinkable and unimaginable feat made possible. Many came to scoff and enjoy the fun of it. But the representatives of the progressive classes of people joined in the ceremony wholeheartedly to make it a success.

There is a story about Ramaprasad Roy, the youngest son of Ram Mohan Roy, the great reformer. He was a friend of Vidyasagar's and had been sympathetic towards widow remarriage from the beginning. But contrary to his assurance, he did not like to turn up at the marriage ceremony. This was not the only case of backing out—there were others also. But this one pained Vidyasagar most, because the person concerned was none else but the son of Ram Mohan, the great pioneer in social reform, whom Vidyasagar himself looked upon as a path-finder. The story is told that before the marriage took place, Vidyasagar had gone to Ramaprasad to request him to come to the ceremony. Ramaprasad said that he would be helping the cause from behind the scene but would not like to join in the ceremony openly. This enraged Vidya-

sagar so much that looking at the picture of Ram Mohan hung on the wall, he exclaimed : "Haul down that picture, throw it away." These were bitter words but coming out of an agonized soul.

The second widow remarriage took place the next day—between Madhusudan Ghosh and Thakamani.

Vidyasagar was personally responsible for a large number of widow remarriages. He did not think his duty done with the solemnization of the marriage ; he would go about perseveringly looking after the welfare of the newly married couples and helping them in every possible way. Widow remarriage was a costly affair. Dowries, ornaments and other paraphernalia had to be arranged for. All these meant a lot of money, and it was Vidyasagar's personal responsibility to provide the same. Otherwise nobody would agree to marry a widow. Vidyasagar used therefore to spend lavishly on the widow remarriages to make them solemnly impressive. He would borrow recklessly and spend recklessly and become heavily encumbered in the process. His spendings ranged upto Rs. 10,000 on a single marriage. The cruelest irony of the situation was that many of those who had, in their initial enthusiasm, promised him all help and support backed out and betrayed him as well as the cause. They left him to fight a lone battle with all the heavy financial liabilities involved therein. Writing to Durga Charan Banerji, father of Surendra Nath Banerji, he regrets his inability to pay back the money he had borrowed from Durga Charan for the reason that those who had promised him financial assistance in the cause had left him in the lurch. But with mounting personal encumbrance and in the face of virulent and vociferous attacks, he stuck steadfastly to his

mission till the end of his life. He helped spread widow remarriage in the rural areas as well. His brother, Shambhu Charan Vidyaratna, tells us that his mother, that remarkable lady, helped him very much in the matter. Remarried couples were sometimes given shelter in Vidyasagar's own rural home.

His only son, Narayan Chandra, married a widow at a later stage. Threatened with excommunication by his kinsmen, Vidyasagar wrote to his brother, Shambhu Chandra Vidyaratna : "The introduction of widow remarriage is the noblest work I have done in my life. There is no possibility that I shall be able to do a nobler work in this life. For this cause I have lost everything and if necessary I shall not hesitate to stake even my life. In this context separation from relatives is a very insignificant sacrifice. I am not altogether a slave of social custom. Whatever I think good for myself or the society I shall do and never retract for fear of the criticism of the people or my relatives."

Widow remarriage gained momentum initially. But gradually the enthusiasm began to flag. Marriages took place sporadically. Early enthusiasts fell off. Many opportunists came to marry widows simply to earn a financial windfall ; they betrayed in the end. The society too was slow to catch up with the progressive measure. Vidyasagar was heart-broken but never lost faith in his mission.

Vidyasagar's reform was far too radical for his age. But it happens like this almost in all cases. Early reforms are often a solo affair or sponsored by a small enlightened minority. It is also often ahead of the age. But as time passes its revolutionary significance gradually unfolds itself.

This has happened in the present case too. Free India's Constitution has granted equality of status to women who were branded with the mark of inferiority in the earlier static society. Divorce, a step further than widow remarriage, has been granted along with new inheritance rights to women. But the ground-work of all these was prepared a hundred years back by a simple but fearless reformer who saw far ahead of his age and was far above his people.

V. CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLYGAMY

ENFORCED widowhood was however not the only target of Vidyasagar's attack ; there was the concomitant evil of polygamy to fight against. In fact it was one of the main factors which contributed to widowhood on an increasing scale. Aware of the great social damage the odious practice of polygamy was doing, Vidyasagar opened attack simultaneously on that front too. During the peak of the widow remarriage controversy in December 1855, he had had a petition signed by 2,500 persons sent to the Government for prohibiting polygamy by a legislative enactment. The petition was signed by some top-ranking persons of the society.

Reference has already been made to *Kulinism* and polygamy in the previous chapter. According to Manu, one must not marry one's daughter to an undeserving person even if she had to remain unmarried throughout her life. This general prescription was so over-stretched that not finding suitable, that is, high-caste, match for their daughters, parents would marry them to any *Kulin*, even if he were old or had already had a few dozens of wives. The main aim of the parents and guardians seemed somehow to make their daughters go through the mere formality of marriage and not their future welfare and happiness. It was sacrificing innocent girls at the altar of an inhuman social custom.

Vidyasagar therefore stormed the bastion of social custom once again by getting an anti-polygamy petition sent to the Government, and it was stipulated that J. P. Grant would bring forward a Bill to the desired effect. But

for one thing, widow remarriage was then more a live issue and compelled more attention. And then intervened the Uprising of 1857 to put all social reform efforts, non-official and official, under a moratorium. It was even argued by some people that the legalization of widow remarriage was one of the causes of the Mutiny. For a time confusion prevailed, and with the assumption of administration by the Crown, marked changes took place in the British attitude towards India and the Indians. The Queen's Proclamation assured official abstention from "all interference with the religious belief or worship of any of our subjects". This appears to have put a stop to the early British enthusiasm for helping the cause of Indian social reform.

Vidyasagar was not the person to throw up the sponge. After the rough and tumble of the Mutiny had been over, he took up his tireless mission again and in February 1866 had one more petition sent to the Government praying for an enactment against polygamy. The petition was signed by 21,000 persons including some top leaders of Bengal. He also waited in a deputation on the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal for the same purpose along with a few top-ranking persons. The anti-polygamy movement thus received a renewed momentum.

But the Government was more cautious this time. It appointed a committee to go into the question. The committee, while admitting the harm polygamy was doing, refrained from recommending even the passing of a declaratory Act against the evil practice. The Government too seemed to have veered round the view that a large majority of people even in Bengal did not want a ban on it. In the case of widow remarriage, the Govern-

ment accepted the opinion of an enlightened minority but not in this case. Widow remarriage without the abolition of polygamy was an incomplete social revolution. So it was fated to remain until the painfully slow process of social evolution made monogamy the only acceptable marriage pattern for the vast bulk of the people.

Vidyasagar's idealism was however made of a strong stuff—it was not so easily to be damped. The old warrior in him would still not give up the fight. Having failed to get a legislation passed by the Government, he adopted another line of approach—launching an open crusade against polygamy. He took up once again his powerful pen and this time against polygamy, as he did for espousing the cause of the widows, and pressed into service his profound knowledge of Shastras and the prevailing social conditions. Ailing and bowed down under advancing age, Vidyasagar produced two remarkable tracts against polygamy in August 1871 and April 1873. The books once again showed a mastery over the Shastras and their injunctions which he invoked and reinterpreted to show that polygamy as it existed had no scriptural sanction or compulsion behind it. Though dignified in his language, Vidyasagar was more bitter than before in his attack on polygamy in particular and other social evils like dowry and child marriage.

He was devastating in his arguments against polygamy and *Kulinism*. In fact many *Kulins* had lost the distinction of caste purity, he argued. Tracing the history of *Kulinism*, he showed how the custom had degenerated into a mercenary one, had been debased and abused and how it had weakened the society. He also poured out his profound pain at the inferior status women had been

relegated to and the misery and suffering to which they had been subjected in consequence. In the preface to his first tract on polygamy he says : "Women are comparatively weak and due to the tyranny of social custom subordinated to men. Owing to this weakness and domination by men, women have to spend their lives in ignominy and subordination. The dominant male tyrannize over, and exploit, them according as they like, and women have helplessly to submit to the same and thus eke out their existence." This was Vidyasagar and 100 years back from now !

One important thing he did was to produce a list of 133 *Kulin* Brahmins of the Hooghly district to show how they had made a mockery of the sacred institution of marriage taking advantage of their caste supremacy. Only a few telling examples are given below :

Bholanath Bandopadhyaya, aged 55, had 80 wives ; Bhagaban Chattopadhyaya, 64, had 72 wives ; Purna Mukhopadhyaya, aged 55, had 62 wives ; Madhusudan Mukhopadhyaya, aged 40, had 56 wives ; and a young man, Durga Bandopadhyaya, aged 20, had a proud list of 16 wives.

Vidyasagar carried on campaign against polygamy through the written word. But in his fifties and in a poor state of health, he naturally lacked the vigour of his youth with which he had attacked the evil of enforced widowhood. Abuses and insults were once again hurled at him as usual for his anti-polygamy campaign. He held out till the last days of his life against the forces of revivalism and reaction which had started asserting themselves.

In this connection one more point, relevant to Vidyasagar's role as social reformer, calls for mention. It was

CAMPAIGN AGAINST POLYGAMY

Vidyasagar's opinion on the Age of Consent Bill and the protection of child wives. That was in 1890 when Vidyasagar was ailing and on his death bed. The Government sought his opinion on the Age of Consent Bill sponsored by it mainly at the instance of the Parsi reformer, Malabari, the purpose being to regulate child marriage and premature consummation thereof. Vidyasagar said that the Garbhadan ceremony being binding upon the Hindus and there being no knowing when a child wife would have her first menses, he was opposed to the fixing of the arbitrary age of twelve, as proposed in the Bill, for the consummation of marriage. He therefore proposed that the Bill should be so framed as to make it an offence for a man to consummate marriage before his wife had her first menses. This, he thought, "would give larger, more real and more extensive protection" to child wives than the Bill had proposed. His great sympathy for the helpless child wives, victims of a tyrannical social order, was evident from the fact that he did not like to leave it to the prohibitory injunction of the Shastras to prevent such marriages but urged the Government "to make a law declaring it penal for a man to have intercourse with his wife before she has her first menses..." This was the last flicker of a dying lamp, his last profound appeal to the law-makers of the country on behalf of oppressed womanhood.

Here a reference to the views of Tilak who started a vehement opposition against the Bill may not be irrelevant. Like Vidyasagar, Tilak too felt that there should be no arbitrary age limit but that the attainment of puberty should be regarded as the age of consummation. While not denying the harm child marriage was doing, Tilak

however objected to the Bill mainly on the ground that the Bill would constitute an alien interference with the social and religious independence of the Hindus.

As regards the other spheres of social reform with which Vidyasagar busied himself, his association with the movement for the eradication of the drink evil, so rampant those days under the dizzy influence of western culture, deserves mention. He heartily collaborated with another zealous reformer, Mr. Peary Charan Sarkar, in the work of the Bengal Temperance Society.

Social reform was the breath of Vidyasagar's being. His biographer, Chandi Charan Bandopadhyaya, recalls how he devised a ten-point pledge which indicates unmistakably his burning passion for a society purged of all its ills. Signatories to the pledge were called upon in the name of religion to promise to educate their daughters, not to marry their daughters before they attained the age of 11, to marry their daughters to good bridegrooms of the same caste without consideration of *Kulinism*, to remarry widowed daughters with their consent, not to marry their sons before they were 18 years of age, not to marry for the second time during the life time of one wife, not to marry daughters to one who had already had a living wife, not to do anything which might hamper the fulfilment of the pledge, to donate one-fiftieth of the monthly income to the appointed treasurer, and not to shrink back from fulfilling the pledge once having signed it. He could enlist only 125 signatories to the pledge.

VI. IN OTHER FIELDS

WE now go back to the story of his life as a Government servant which cannot be said to have been very happy. It may be recalled that in July 1847, he resigned his post at the Government Sanskrit College owing to differences with the Secretary. He thus lost the first round of the battle. Then on his re-entry into the College as its Principal, he faced an awkward situation in connection with the Ballantyne report. But this time the Government upheld his point of view. He however received a great shock of disappointment when the Government let him down on the question of the spread of female education. Lastly came his differences with Gordon Young, the civilian Director of Public Instruction, with whom he did not see eye to eye on many matters. It is true that high-placed English officials like Dr. Mouat, Halliday, Cecil Beadon and others held him in high esteem and generally upheld his point of view. His intimacy with Halliday was remarkable, considering that it was a relationship between an Englishman and an Indian, between a boss and a subordinate. It was with the help and encouragement of such well-meaning foreigners that Vidyasagar could carry on his educational reforms. But with the installation of a young civilian officer at the head of the Education Department in place of the earlier Council of Education, Vidyasagar gradually started finding the atmosphere uncongenial to his natural independence of spirit.

Apart from the lack of a suitable atmosphere for his great mission, Vidyasagar was suffering from bad health. Even then he could possibly take long leave for recupera-

tion instead of resigning. But another factor seemed to have created frustration in him. It was the appointment of one Mr. Lodge to the post of the Inspectorship of the Schools of South Bengal. This was a clear discrimination against Vidyasagar, because with all his experience and knowledge of the educational problems, he had a natural claim to the post when it fell vacant. But the claim was ignored. It is surprising that Halliday, the Lieutenant-Governor, was a great admirer of Vidyasagar and yet chose to ignore his claim. Possibly he was under some pressure from some quarters or perhaps anti-Indian prejudice was too strong behind the scene. But in any case it shattered Vidyasagar's illusion of receiving justice at the hands of our alien rulers. In August 1857, therefore, he wrote a letter to the Director of Public Instruction expressing his desire to resign his post and sent a copy to Halliday. The latter, really not prepared for such a surprise, pressed Vidyasagar not to resign. In deference to his wishes, Vidyasagar agreed to work for one more year and finally resigned in August 1858. Accepting his resignation in September 1858, the Government noted with regret that the Pandit had resigned somewhat "ungraciously", as he had "no fair reason for dissatisfaction", but acknowledged "his long and zealous service in the cause of native education". That brief acknowledgement was the only reward for one who had given his life-blood as it were to the cause of education. He received no other reward, not even a pension, his total service period having been only of about ten years' duration.

This happened at a time when he was in the thick of the widow remarriage agitation and sorely in need of money. Of course he had a sizeable income from his

publications. But his charities too were fabulously large—his monthly benefactions amounted to about Rs. 1,500, according to Buckland. Besides, the widow marriages were making fantastic claims on his purse. Yet he resigned a post carrying a salary of Rs. 500 a month, Rs. 300 for the Principalship and Rs. 200 for the Special Inspectorship of Schools. The strength and determination of the man who could just throw away such a post can easily be imagined.

Vidyasagar was a missionary in the garb of a public servant. When therefore he found the atmosphere uncongenial to the mission of his life and felt that he could carry it on better from outside the steel frame, nothing could deter him from quitting Government service. He certainly cared for money but not at the cost of his self-respect, his independent character and above all the mission of his life. The simple Pandit, in *dhoti* and *chadar* and with his typical *chatti* (chappal) on, who went in and out of the Government house with his head held high, was made of steel.

With mounting claims of social reform and an increasing charity bill to foot, he was at one time so hard-pressed for money that he wanted to offer himself for the Professorship of Sanskrit at the Presidency College and wrote to the then Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Cecil Beadon, accordingly. But even in his difficulties his sense of self-respect was so strong that he made it a precondition that he would not accept the post at a salary lower than that of the European professors. It seems that with all his admiration for Vidyasagar, Beadon did not find it easy to fulfil the condition, and the matter fell through.

Thus ended a memorable chapter of his life. Records

of his service life show that he was held in the highest esteem by the British officers for his independence, honesty, integrity and scholarship. But he was too independent a man and had too great a task to accomplish to remain cabined and confined within the narrow, and for him crippling, official steel frame. But so long as he was in service, he worked untiringly to reorientate education and to lay a solid foundation for its future growth. During the middle of the last century, there was a good deal of confusion regarding the form, content and medium of education. Worst of all, there were no educationists—officials were dealing with the vital subject. Indians had not much of a voice in shaping the educational policy. It was Vidyasagar who made his voice heard in an otherwise confused situation.

Though out of service, he was however not out of touch with the Government which sought his opinion on many matters pertaining to education and social welfare. For instance, his opinion was sought on the reorganization of courses at the Sanskrit College. He opposed the idea of the abolition of the Sanskrit College and the diversion of the funds, thus saved, to the diffusion of Sanskrit learning in the existing schools and colleges. His opinion was also sought on the spread of mass education.

Some time before Vidyasagar's resignation, the Government had opened an institution known as the Wards' Institution, with the purpose of training up the minor heirs of princes and zamindars. Vidyasagar was appointed a Visitor to the Institution in 1863 and, in that capacity, he recommended a number of changes. His total abhorrence for corporal punishment in educational institutions, manifest in other contexts too, is on record in his report.

When the Government sought Vidyasagar's opinion on the Hindu Wills Bill in 1869, he gave his views strictly according to scriptural injunctions so far as succession was concerned. Reference has already been made to the Government seeking his opinion on the Age of Consent Bill.

One great act of Vidyasagar's life in the period of his retirement from Government service was the setting up of Hindu Family Annuity Fund. It was a pioneering measure initiated at a time when life insurance and family security measures were not much in vogue. It was of great economic significance for the middle class Hindu families and shows that he was not a visionary idealist but a stern economic realist. Coming from a middle class family, Vidyasagar knew very well how helpless the dependents became when the sole bread-earner of a joint family, the then prevailing family pattern, died. He also knew in what an agony a widow had to spend her life under social inhibitions and in economic helplessness. Hence he devised a scheme under which a man depositing a certain amount of money every month with the Fund could ensure minimum financial security to his family members on his death.

Another great achievement of his retired life was the Metropolitan Institution. Originally known as Calcutta Training School, the institution was established by some citizens of Calcutta with a view to providing English education to middle class students at a moderate expense. There was hardly any educational effort those days which could dispense with Vidyasagar's services. So he came to be associated with this institution too. Due to some circumstances, the entire responsibility of the school

finally came upon him. It was renamed Hindu Metropolitan Institution and became the ruling passion of the old reformer's retired life. He tended it almost with paternal care. In 1864 the affiliation of the institution for higher education under the Calcutta University was sought. But this was rejected, because the Europeans then in control of the University did not think that a 'native' institution could really impart higher English education. In 1872 Vidyasagar again sought for its affiliation up to the First Arts Examination, and permission was this time given. Gradually the institution went on being upgraded, producing progressively impressive results so as to arouse the jealousy of the Europeans and missionaries working in the educational field. They started wondering how an institution owned exclusively by 'natives' could produce such good results.

The mention of the Metropolitan Institution in some details is necessary because it gives revealing glimpses of Vidyasagar's character and thinking. In the first instance, it shows Vidyasagar's leaning towards English education, though not at the cost of Indian languages and culture; in other words, he was convinced that the days of isolationism were gone and that a blending of what is good in both the eastern and western cultures could advance the cause of the renaissance then going on in the country. Necessarily he built up the institution with the purpose of making available English education at moderate expenses to the middle class students. Then again the products of the missionary institutions or of the Hindu College tended to be too alienated from the national spirit as a result of receiving English education. But such a possibility would be obviated in an institution like Vidyasagar's owned and

conducted by Indians and yet imparting English education. In other words, as Rabindranath Tagore has said, through the Metropolitan Institution, the foundation of English education was for the first time laid by Vidyasagar on a national basis. The result was a blending of the western spirit with the Indian spirit so as to create a resurgence of nationalism and political consciousness through the medium of the institution. Without being a politician, Vidyasagar thus helped the national awakening in the political sense of the term. It is to be noticed that Surendra Nath Banerjea, when dismissed from civil service and shut out from the Bar, joined Vidyasagar's institution as a Professor of English and created a tremendous awakening among the students. In the same way other eminent men joined the institution. It thus became a centre from which our nascent nationalism drew its early sustenance. At the initial stage of our freedom movement, there were only two instruments in the hands of the Indians whereby they could foster the national spirit among the youth and thus quicken the growth of national awakening. These two instruments were the Press and the educational institutions. We shall deal with Vidyasagar's role in regard to the Press later. But so far as education was concerned, he led the way in an impressive manner, and the Metropolitan Institution was one such potent instrument of fostering budding patriotism. It is only in the fitness of things that it has since then been named after Vidyasagar himself.

VII. A MAKER, A BUILDER

VIDYASAGAR had a significant role to play in the development of modern Bengali literature. Indeed he occupies a unique position as one of the makers of Bengali prose. It was with him that Bengali prose entered its modern, creative phase.

Early and mediaeval Bengali literature was very poor in prose—in fact it had no literary prose worth the name. Bengali prose really developed during the British period, and that was primarily on foreign initiative. The Serampore missionaries headed by the celebrated William Carey gave a fillip to Bengali prose writing and publication mainly for the purpose of the propagation of Christianity. Then there was the Fort William College where budding British civilians were required to pick up the knowledge of Bengali. Carey was the head of the Bengali department of the College. But the lack of Bengali text-books stood in the way of Bengali teaching. Accordingly Carey gathered round himself a band of eight scholars and had 13 Bengali prose books produced in 15 years. But truly it was Ram Mohan Roy, who laid the early foundation of modern Bengali prose through his Bengali translations of Sanskrit texts, his polemical writings on theological topics and through his periodical, *Sambad Kaumudi*. Mention must also be made of the role played by the *Tattwabodhini Patrika* and particularly its talented Editor, Akshay Kumar Dutta. The latter developed a powerful prose style as a vehicle for dealing with such serious subjects as history, science, philosophy, religion and so on. In this way Bengali prose was developing. But even then it was awaiting the

magic touch of Vidyasagar's pen to be quickened into a living, throbbing language.

Vidyasagar, who himself belonged to the Tattwabodhini group, introduced a prose style which marked a significant advance.

Vidyasagar was primarily a maker, a builder. Education was in a poor state. Good text-books were not available. Bengali prose itself was in an undeveloped condition. He thought it his first duty to fulfil these needs. He must first build the fabric of the language and make it a fit vehicle for varied expression. Necessarily he had to have recourse mostly to translations and adaptations, instead of attempting original compositions on any significant scale. His original compositions were his four tracts on widow remarriage and polygamy, his incomplete autobiography, his essay on Sanskrit language and literature and the pseudonymous works attributed to him. It is surprising to think how he could combine in himself a life of a devoted scholarship with ceaseless activity. He was a voracious reader, and his library was stocked with choice books in Bengali, Sanskrit, English and Hindi. He was a perfect stylist and writer of consummate skill. Under the pressure of necessity he had to write quite a number of text-books for children and for use in educational institutions. But there was an artist lying hidden in the core of his personality. His total literary output exceeds 50 volumes.

His first published book, *Betal Panchabinshati* (1847), was based on a Hindi book named *Baital Pachchisi*. The book, at first deemed unfit to be used as a text-book at the Fort William College, was eventually accepted for that purpose being highly recommended by Marshman of the Serampore Mission. This way he passed his first literary test. His

next two books were *Banglar Itihas* (1848) and *Jibancharit* (1849), both adaptations from English books. *Bodhodaya* (1851), *Kathamala* (1856) and *Akhyanamanjari* (1863), all meant to be children's text-books, followed one by one. But Vidyasagar's greatest gift to millions of Bengali children was the primer, *Varna Parichay, Parts I and II*, which dominated Bengal's elementary education for over 100 years. The popularity of *Varna Parichay* was immense : it became a part of every Bengali household. It introduced a systematic but at the same time easy method of learning the rudiments of the Bengali language.

His *Shakuntala* (1854) based on Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* and *Sitar Vanavas* (1860) based on Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamcharit* read like original compositions. The artist in Vidyasagar comes out openly in these books. His inherent sense of beauty and art has its full play. Here is Vidyasagar free from the dust and din of social reform controversies and steeped in the beauty and grandeur of the world of classics. It must be noted in this connection that he edited a number of Sanskrit classics like *Kumar-sambhav*, *Kadambari*, *Meghdutam*, *Raghuvansham* and so on. Sanskrit is a difficult language and a student takes many years even to master the Sanskrit grammar. This caused a disincentive to the cultivation of the great Indian treasure. That is why he wrote introduction to *Sanskrit Grammar* (1851) and *Vyakaran Kaumudi* in four parts (1853, 1854 and 1862) to make Sanskrit grammar simplified and easily assimilable.

By writing *Vrantivilas* on the basis of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, he displayed the wide range of his literary taste.

His four tracts on widow remarriage and polygamy and

his essay on Sanskrit language and literature (1853) occupy an important place in the history of Bengali prose. The last named essay contains an outline of the Sanskrit literature. Vidyasagar started writing his autobiography but did not proceed beyond two chapters narrating his birth, parentage and early childhood days.

Some books are believed to have been written by Vidyasagar under assumed names, namely, *Ati Alpa Haila* (1873), *Abar Ati Alpa Haila* (1873), *Brajavilas* (1884) and so on. By internal evidence and also on the basis of the testimony of some of his contemporaries, these books are attributed to Vidyasagar. They are polemical writings dealing mostly with the controversy on widow remarriage and the abolition of polygamy and are indeed in the nature of satiric rejoinders to the abuses heaped upon him. Unlike his tracts, these books are written in a lighter vein. The style too is easy, at places, almost colloquial.

Vidyasagar is an unquestioned maker of Bengali prose. Before his advent Bengali prose was highly Sanskritized, prolix and cumbrous, and lacked the ease, grace and idiomatic fluency of a modern speech. The Tattwabodhini writers like Akshay Kumar started breaking the trammels of the language. But it was left to Vidyasagar to free the language from obstacles and obscurities and make it a fit vehicle for literary as well as practical use.

It is not that he un-Sanskritized the language altogether. But his judicious use of Sanskrit words did not make the prose prolix or cumbersome but added to its elegance and dignity and made it powerful and expressive. In other words, he set the standard for what is called *Sadhu Bhasha* or elegant diction. Earl of Ronaldshay says in this context : "Where the Pandits of the Fort William College had failed,

Vidyasagar succeeded, for into the warp of Bengali prose he wove a woof of Sanskrit which far from rendering it foolishly grandiloquent gave it a new status and classic dignity". Vidyasagar not only introduced punctuation marks into the language but also rationalized the syntax and construction of sentences so as to make it easily usable. On the artistic side he, for the first time, established a rhythmic prose pattern through balanced construction and cadences of words. Indeed he imparted to language a beauty that is born of art.

Vidyasagar's linguistic reforms thus laid the foundation of Bengali prose so soundly that the emergence of Bankim Chandra Chatterji as a novelist and master stylist was easily possible. Despite differences with Vidyasagar and his early reservations about the quality of Vidyasagar's literary output, Bankim had to admit that what Vidyasagar had done in the field of Bengali prose was the mainstay of himself and the contemporary writers. There was a reaction against the Vidyasagari style or elegant Bengali in the shape of *Alaler Gharer Dulal* written by Peary Chand Mitra under the assumed name of Tek Chand Thakur. This work completely rejected the Sanskritic style and based itself absolutely on the colloquial tongue. Bankim followed a middle path between Vidyasagar and Tek Chand but tried in the end to bring language nearer and nearer to the common speech.

In this linguistic evolution, Vidyasagar provided the needed momentum and dynamism but for which the language would not have progressed so fast as it did. Vidyasagar was an all-round reformer—whether it was in education or in society or in language and literature.

Vidyasagar was not a journalist. Nor was he connected

with politics which is the mainstay of journalism. Nevertheless he was instrumental in giving a fillip to journalism.

Bengali journalism was then making rapid strides. Beginning with the *Digdarshan* and *Samachar Darpan* of the Serampore missionaries, a large number of Bengali periodicals had come out. In ten years from 1831 to 1840 as many as 30 journals had come out. Not that all of them lived long enough. But then their publication indicated growing public consciousness about social, political and literary affairs.

It has already been mentioned that Vidyasagar was a member of the Editorial Board of the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*. Again in collaboration with his friend, Madan Mohan Tarkalankar, he brought out a paper called *Sarbashubhakari Patrika* which however proved to be short-lived. In 1858 he with the help of his friend, Dwarakanath Vidyabhushan, brought out *Som Prakash* which, to quote Earl of Ronaldshay, "gave a new refinement to Bengali journalism." It came to exert a great influence upon the Bengali society. Vidyasagar countenanced it under the Editorship of Dwarakanath Vidyabhushan and helped it develop as a powerful socio-political organ of progressive views. On the death of Harish Chandra Mukherji, the Editor of the *Hindu Patriot*, which was an organ of the middle class society, the responsibility of running the English paper fell on Vidyasagar, and he appointed Kristo Das Pal as its Editor. The paper rose to eminence and was respected by the officials and non-officials alike. Eventually however Vidyasagar severed connection with it owing to differences with Pal.

From his association with these two papers, it is evident that Vidyasagar realized the importance of journalism in

furthering the social—and also the political—cause and lent whatever support he could to it. Incidentally *Som Prakash* used to deal seriously with political topics, unlike the earlier Bengali journals which confined themselves mostly to socio-religious matters.

Vidyasagar's political views are not known ; nor would it be proper to presume them from the papers he was associated with. But on the whole he did not shrink from supporting the cause of journalism that reflected progressive but sober opinions on public issues. Incidentally in 1876 the sponsors of the Indian Association like Anand Mohan Bose and Surendra Nath Banerji desired him to become the President of the proposed political organisation. While declining on ground of health, Vidyasagar however endorsed the idea of starting the organization for the country's political advancement.

VIII. A LEGEND IN LIFE

VIDYASAGAR was a man of unbounded sympathy. His charities were large, his humanism was deep and unfathomable. Even in his life time he became a legendary figure. And this was not only because of his social crusade but also because of his boundless benevolence. People lovingly called him "ocean of kindness". In his personal life he was extremely simple and austere. But when it came to spending for others, he was lavish—almost to a fault. No body in distress ever came to him and went back disappointed. Hundreds of indigent students, orphans and widows lived on his regular charity list. Perhaps nobody would be so rash as to incur personal debts to help people in distress. But that was almost habitual with Vidyasagar. Even when he was out of service and dependent only on the income from his press and publications, he remained as generous as ever.

A classic example of his benevolence was provided by the help he rendered to Michael Madhusudan Dutt, to whom reference has already been made. In Versailles the poet of the immortal *Meghnadbadh Kavya*, which had brought about a revolution in Bengali poetry, was facing starvation and possibly jail, along with his French wife and children, because of his indigence and debts. When everybody in Bengal failed him, he wrote to Vidyasagar for help and assured his wailing wife that the man to whom he had appealed "had the genius and wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman and the heart of a Bengali mother." And he was right—the appeal did not fail. Moved beyond measure by Michael's piteous letter, Vidya-

sagar resolved to save the poet from distress and degradation on foreign soil. He approached Michael's friends and well-wishers for help but without success. He therefore borrowed Rs. 1,500 and sent it to the poet. The matter did not end there. He went on sending money to the habitually extravagant poet until he was able to qualify for the Bar in England. And for doing so, he recklessly incurred debts regardless of the fact that the spendthrift poet might not be able to pay the money back. Michael was Vidyasagar's counterpart in poetry. He was a rebel who created new poetic forms out of the ruins of the old, even as Vidyasagar himself made bold innovations in prose. The two together ushered in the modern age in Bengali literature. The two rebels had an implicit mutual sympathy. Many avoided, even hated, Michael, because he had embraced Christianity. But Vidyasagar loved and admired him.

In his school days Vidyasagar used to purchase nice garments for his classfellows out of his scholarship money while himself wearing rough, homespun stuff. This early fellow-feeling gradually extended to the larger society. From his early days right up to the end of his life, he ministered to innumerable patients with his own hands. He would pick up a cholera patient from the street and nurse him. And in his service to humanity, he was singularly free from any complex on the basis of caste, creed or community. The Santhals of Karmatar (in Santhal Parganas, Bihar), where he owned a house and sometimes retired for rest and recuperation, were his special favourites. He helped them in many ways and even started a school for them. Indeed he was doing pioneering work in the matter of the uplift of backward

tribes which is one of the cherished ideals of independent India. Once while in a very poor state of health, he was advised by a friend to go to Karmatar for recuperation. Vidyasagar started weeping piteously saying that he had not money enough to go there. Explaining he said that he could not afford to have his meals in Karmatar, while innumerable Santhals went without any, and that he had not money enough to feed them all and adequately.

The idea of organized philanthropy occurred to him as early as in those days. Once when famine stalked Bengal in 1866-67, he was the prime mover in having free kitchens opened through Government help in the Midnapore and Hooghly districts. Not satisfied with official effort, he took the pioneering step of organizing non-official relief by opening a free kitchen in his village and all at his own expense. One does not know how many lives were thus saved from starvation death, but they must have been legion ; for, according to Chandi Charan Bandopadhyaya the kitchen worked for about three or four months at a stretch and 12 cooks used to prepare food for the famine-stricken people. Once again when the Burdwan district was stricken with Malaria epidemic and hundreds of people were facing death he urged the Government to take remedial measures and himself organized a charitable dispensary. He went about personally looking after the treatment and diet of the poor patients without any consideration of caste and creed. He would, as reports go, gladly hug a diseased Muslim child to his breast, even though he was a Brahmin. In serving poor patients he perhaps anticipated Gandhiji who did not hesitate to nurse a leper.

Vidyasagar was no isolationist. But he had a national pride deep in his heart. To him the symbol of this legiti-

mate pride was his dress comprising a *dhoti*, a *chadar* and a pair of *chatti* (a kind of simple slipper with toes covered and heels uncovered). It was a most modest dress symbolical not only of his own poor origin but also of the national poverty. Indeed there are reasons to believe that he looked upon it as his national dress and would not do away with it at any cost. In that dress and with such a humble footwear on, he used to meet the topmost British officials including the Lieutenant-Governor. In this respect Vidyasagar reminds us of his only parallel, that is, Gandhiji, who alone had the moral courage to walk the corridors of the Viceregal Lodge in loin cloth and lowly 'chappals'.

Once or twice at the insistence of Lieutenant-Governor Halliday, Vidyasagar visited the Government House in ceremonial dress, but eventually he expressed his strong dislike for it, and Halliday, who appreciated his moral conviction, allowed him to come in any dress he liked.

Once again while visiting the library of the Asiatic Society and Indian Museum at Calcutta in the company of a friend, he was prevented from entering the same because of his *chatti*. He lodged a strong protest with the authorities concerned, and there was a great public controversy over the issue.

There is another interesting story about his famous *chatti*. On one occasion, while he was the Principal of the Sanskrit College, he happened to visit Mr. Kerr, British Principal of the Presidency College, on official business. When he entered Mr. Kerr's room, the latter not only did not receive him courteously but on the contrary kept sitting tight on his chair spreading out his legs on the table. Vidyasagar came back much offended

at this unmerited insult. It so happened thereafter that Kerr had to come to Vidyasagar's room to discuss an urgent matter. When Kerr entered the room, Vidyasagar showed him no more courtesy than the former had done him—he kept sitting tight on his chair with his 'chatti'-clad legs stretched on the table. The English Principal of the premier college of Calcutta was very angry at the audacity of a native Pandit and lodged a complaint with the Secretary to the Education Council, Dr. Mouat, who knew Vidyasagar's temperament very well. The reply Vidyasagar gave to his query was this : "Being a semi-civilized native, I thought the behaviour Mr. Kerr had meted out to me was civilized European courtesy. So when he happened to come to me, I only returned the courtesy." This incident shows his national pride and his revolt, of course in his own way, against the insult of an arrogant foreigner.

The 'chatti' had become a symbol of his deep national consciousness, his sturdy independence, his unflinching moral courage and conviction.

There are various other stories centering round Vidyasagar which throw a revealing light on the many facets of his character. Once a gentleman got down at the Karmatar Railway Station and started shouting for a coolie just to carry the small bag he had with him. Suddenly a man in a very humble dress appeared before him and carried the bag outside the station platform even as a coolie would do. Boarding a palanquin waiting outside, the gentleman offered him two pice as portage. The coolie then replied : "You need not pay me. I just helped you out seeing that you were worried over carrying a small bag. My name is Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar." One can easily imagine the plight of the gentleman.

Vidyasagar was very fond of his library which had a fine collection of books. One day a rich and aristocratic gentleman came to see him at his residence in the Badurbagan area of Calcutta wearing a shawl worth Rs. 500. In the course of conversation, he told Vidyasagar : "What is the use of getting all these books bound at such a high cost ?" Vidyasagar at once replied : "Since you can prevent cold with a rug worth a rupee and quarter, what is the point in your putting on such a costly shawl ?" Vidyasagar would not tolerate arrogance of wealth or of so-called aristocracy.

Vidyasagar's charity often followed strange and unexpected bypaths. And most of the charity was done in an unostentatious way, almost in secrecy. He would be walking on the streets and, hearing lamentation from a wayside residence, enter it and give some money to the distressed family. He would pick up beggars and cast-aways from the street and help them. On one occasion he was walking on the streets of Calcutta when it was well past midnight. It was a cold, wintry night, and he saw some prostitutes waiting for customers at that unearthly hour. He approached them and said : "Go, mothers, take this money and go back to your rooms. Don't wait in the cold."

Despite his hectic activities and the many problems he had to deal with, he never lost his natural sense of humour. The grave, sober, Pandit was indeed very sociable and spent some time with his friends in talks and jokes. In other words, he was what is called clubable. He along with a few others had set up a club whose purpose was jointly to have meals by turn at the residence of the members. Once there was a grand feast, in which one of the members over-ate and had stomach trouble. Other

members insisted that since he was a man with a weak stomach, he was unfit to be a member of the eaters' club. But Vidyasagar disagreed. He said that the man was so voracious that he would even eat himself to death and that he was eminently fitted to be a member of the club.

There is a story about a sub-judge. The gentleman had married a second wife at a ripe old age. Vidyasagar said : "The doors of heaven are now fully open for you." The sub-judge was flabbergasted and wished to know the reason. Vidyasagar said : "There is a guard at the entrance to heaven who asks everybody if he had done good deeds or bad deeds in his life on earth. Those who have virtue to their credit go straight to heaven and those who are sinners, to hell. Once the guard was in a dilemma over a man who had done nothing particularly good or particularly bad in this world. On enquiry the man disclosed that he had married for the second time in his old age. The guard at once welcomed him in heaven saying that he had already experienced hell in the world." The sub-judge had his reply.

Here is another story. One day Vidyasagar was talking with his friends. One of them said that he had heard somebody abusing him. Vidyasagar atonce exclaimed : "Why, I have not done him any good ?" Human ingratitude made itself so nakedly apparent to him that even the staunch reformer possibly became a bit of a frustrated man towards the end of his life.

There are innumerable anecdotes current about Vidyasagar. Many of them may be based on hearsay. But the fact is that so many stories do not get currency about an ordinary mortal. It is only an extraordinary personality round whom such a legendary halo grows.

IX. QUALITIES OF CHARACTER

It is not easy to assess the qualities of a character so varied, so complex and, in a way, so baffling as Vidyasagar's. In many details his character represented qualities in contrast. He was born in, and breathed, an atmosphere of orthodoxy, where age-long built-in prejudices had had their way. Yet he was singularly free from all forms of orthodoxy and became the spearhead of some of the most radical movements of the day. Indeed the spirit of new enlightenment and progress generated in the 19th century found in that simple, sage-like Pandit a fitting channel of expression. Immersed in India's ancient lore, he had again the most advanced ideas about education. He was no isolationist, as most mediaeval societies tend to be when confronted with modern, industrialized civilizations: nor would he shut out the new light. In essence he was a rationalist, who would accept nothing that did not satisfy his own reason and conviction.

Once Vidyasagar was convinced of the rationale of a particular course of action and determined to follow it, he would do so however formidable the obstacles might be. He was a man of strong and unbending will and of fearless independence of character.

For about half a century he participated most vigorously in the life of the contemporary society and in the process came in close contact with thousands of people of varied types. But nowhere did he compromise his principle for fear, favour or personal gain. He would go it alone rather than yield or throw up the sponge. During the widow remarriage campaign, many friends turned lukewarm and

many betrayed. But Vidyasagar carried the burden of the campaign practically on his lone shoulders. It was perhaps his uncompromising nature which was at least in a measure responsible for his domestic unhappiness, a topic to which we shall revert in the following chapter.

One recalls here the story of how he finally left his native village, Birsingha. A man named Muchiram Bandopadhyaya had sought Vidyasagar's blessings for marrying a widow. Initially sympathetic, Vidyasagar however withdrew his support to the marriage because of certain strong reasons advanced against it by some responsible persons of his village, Birsingha, where Vidyasagar was staying at that time. But some among Vidyasagar's brothers in collaboration with some local people got the marriage solemnized at a venue just near Vidyasagar's ancestral house against Vidyasagar's wishes. He was so mortified that he left the village immediately never to come back to it again.

He came in contact with many Englishmen whose esteem and appreciation he was able to earn by virtue of his sterling character. Buckland says : "He (Vidyasagar) combined a fearless independence of character with great gentleness and the simplicity of a child in his dealings with people of all classes". Yet in his dealings with our British rulers, he never sacrificed his sturdy independence. In a country newly brought under the full imperialist impact of an alien rule, such an independence of character was rare indeed.

A scholar, a writer, a man of contemplation, he was indeed a man of vigorous action. His entire life was a dedication to work, to service of humanity. That frail Indian frame had the masculinity and indefatigable energy

of the West. He worked untiringly, incessantly, almost worked himself to death, and had hardly had the time to look after his health, which went on deteriorating from day to day. One wonders how the emotionally charged delicate atmosphere of Bengal could produce such a virile character.

Yet this stern, stubborn, masculine character was simple like a child, tender like a Bengali mother. Can anybody believe that such a man used to weep literally? Yes, he did and on the testimony of many of his contemporaries. The sight of human distress moved him so much that he wept like a child. His benevolence has already been referred to. His philanthropy defied any modern sociological definition; it was a type by itself, a spontaneous overflow of an extraordinarily tender heart. A rationalist to the core of his being, he was in this respect irrational, indiscriminate; he would give and help thoughtlessly, even without considering whether the beneficiary was a fake or a genuine one. There were many instances where he was cheated by dishonest persons. But he would rather be duped than not give at all. His was instinctive philanthropy.

Most remarkable was his freedom from social and religious constraint. Early in his career he was a friend of the ultra-radical Young Bengal group. Not having anything in common with them, he was however not averse to the spirit of progress that animated the image-breakers, though he would not naturally support the boisterous excesses committed by them in the name of progress and enlightenment. Then again Vidyasagar's close association with the Tattwabodhini group and the Brahmos was memorable. Obviously the mission of his life, lying dormant in him, was shaped to a large extent by the progres-

sive spirit of Tattwabodhini. Some of the Brahmo leaders were his close associates in the social reform movement. Once Vijay Krishna Goswami, a religious leader of Bengal, complained to Vidyasagar that his excellent juvenile book, *Bodhdhaya*, whose purpose was to impart elementary knowledge to children contained useful lessons but none on God. Vidyasagar took note of the lacuna and incorporated a lesson on God in the next edition of the book. But the first sentence of the lesson was "God is formless, like consciousness". This was obviously an echo from the Brahmo prayer halls.

Was Vidyasagar an atheist? If not, what was his conception of God? Indeed his adversaries did not hesitate to call him an atheist. Surprisingly enough, Vidyasagar was most silent about God or his own religious opinions. He jocularly said that he did not express any opinion on religion for the fear that he might be proved wrong and thus be punished by God after his death. He believed that there was a Supreme Being but never believed that one way or the other was the surest way to reach Him. He followed his own conviction rather than traditions and injunctions. That is why he was remarkably liberal in respect of the religion or the religious views of others. According to Vidyasagar's brother, Shambhu Chandra Vidyaratna, Vidyasagar did not believe in popular gods and goddesses. On the contrary, he worshipped his parents almost in terms of Godhood. He was not enthusiastic about receiving initiation (*Diksha*) as was customary in his family, nor about strict adherence to Brahminical rites.

The two great contemporaries, Vidyasagar and Ram Krishna Paramahansa, provide a study in contrast, while

throwing light on the two trends of the renaissance then going on. Drawn by his great reputation, Ram Krishna saw Vidyasagar at the latter's Badurbagan residence in Calcutta in 1882. It was a case of the saint visiting the savant and not *vice versa*. Ram Krishna paid a high tribute to him saying that after visiting pools, canals and rivers, he had come to have a vision of "Sagar" (Sea). Vidyasagar showed him due respect but was not interested in the path shown by the Paramahansa. He did not even pay a return visit to the saint, despite the latter's request. With all his appreciation of Vidyasagar, Paramahansa thought that he was a mere scholar and had got no taste or spiritual realization. He said : "Vidyasagar has learning, kindness, but no inner vision".

Evidently Vidyasagar had no interest in the path of spiritual meditation shown by the Paramahansa. He was far too engrossed in this world and its many problems to think of the other world. He too was a Sanyasi but in a different way. He was a Karmayogi, so to say. Indeed Vidyasagar was a philosopher rather than a religious man in the narrow sense of the term. He never concerned himself with religious controversies but kept himself scrupulously confined to the social and educational sphere. He followed his own philosophic faith in God in his own quiet and unostentatious way. Primarily he was a humanist whose greatest religion was service to man. "He had no faith in religious movements; rather he thought that religious movements impeded social movements."

Vidyasagar represented the early phase of the renaissance—the rational, liberal phase; the Paramahansa represented its later emotional phase based on religious revival. And the contrast is obvious.

X. END OF AN ERA

THE best period of Vidyasagar's life was from 1851 to 1858 when he was Principal of the Sanskrit College. These seven years were packed with splendid efforts and equally splendid achievements. Not that he retired from the field after quitting the Government job. He was temperamentally far too dynamic to rest on his laurels, however magnificent they might be. He went on actively participating in various kinds of social and educational activities of which an account has been given in a previous chapter.

In July 1864 he was made an honorary member of the Royal Asiatic Society of London. He was honoured by the citizens of Leipzig. In 1880 he was made a CIE by the Government in recognition of his services. He was not very enthusiastic about it and did not go to receive the award personally. In 1883 he became a Fellow of the Punjab University.

He had the greatest shock of his life when his mother, to whom he was much devoted, died in Benares in April 1871. Five years later his father too passed away. His wife was suffering from severe dysentery and died in August 1888, only three years before his own demise.

Vidyasagar had three surviving brothers, Dinabandhu, Shambhu Chandra and Ishan, about whose welfare he was very solicitous. He had one son and four daughters. His elder son-in-law, Gopal Chandra, died a premature death leaving his wife and two children behind. This was another great shock to him.

Vidyasagar's domestic life was not happy, despite his constant solicitude for all the members of his joint family

and the large amounts of money he used regularly to pay them. It looks surprising that Vidyasagar's wife, Dinamoyee Devi, had no role to play in the eventful life of her illustrious husband. An ardent champion of female education, Vidyasagar did not educate her, apparently because "his father, Thakurdas, was opposed to female education". Thus there was a wide intellectual gap between the husband and the wife. On the one hand, Vidyasagar was extremely attached to his parents, on the other, he devoted most of his time to serving the cause of the people. As a result of all these factors, Dinamoyee never came to occupy in his life the position which the wife of an enlightened, progressive, husband may naturally be expected to do. Vidyasagar was also not happy in his relations with his only son whom he disinherited. That was another cause of estrangement between him and his wife. Narayan Chandra seems to have been as spirited as his father. Later on he repented and sought reconciliation with his father. One of his brothers, Dinabandhu, claimed right over Vidyasagar's Sanskrit Press and even wanted to sue him in the court. Vidyasagar was however generous to all and never failed to help them with money.

Vidyasagar had been keeping indifferent health for quite some time. The accident he met with in December 1868 had caused a grave injury to his liver and damaged his stomach beyond any chance of recovery. He was moving from place to place for regaining his health but without any effect. Sense of isolation and possibly, to an extent of disillusionment, was enveloping him. Apart from his isolation from his near and dear ones, he had been duped and betrayed by many in whom he had put his trust. The early enthusiasm over widow remarriage, the greatest

achievement of his life, had ebbed away. A phase of revivalism had ensued. The spirit of radicalism had started retreating. Vidyasagar was thus a lonely man, out of tune with the new forces.

His wife's death in 1888 dealt him the last cruel blow.

Gradually his illness took a serious turn—it was suspected to be cancer of the stomach. Most competent doctors of Calcutta, Indian and European, were treating him. But the end could not be averted. Homoeopathy was tried without success. The end came on July 29, 1891 at the age of a little over 70 years. With him an era came to a close.

Vidyasagar was a lineal descendant of Ram Mohan Roy. He carried forward the task the Raja had initiated. But unlike his illustrious predecessor, he did not get mixed up with religious controversies, nor did he undertake reforms outside the framework of the Hindu religion. But within the pale of Dharma Shastra, he made really radical efforts to bring about vast changes in the society. He did not want to go beyond the society's capacity for assimilation. It was sheer practical sense which dictated keeping within the bounds of the Hindu religion.

His reforms had a wide impact outside Bengal. Reference has been made in a previous chapter to the reactions, both favourable and adverse, to the Widow Remarriage Bill introduced in the Council mainly on the initiative of Vidyasagar. As in Bengal, so also in Maharashtra, stirrings of social consciousness were evident. It is to be noticed that Vidyasagar had his two tracts on widow remarriage translated into English and published in 1856 under the title *Marriage of Hindu Widows*, so that his ideas could reach the wider public all over the country. In 1865 the well-known social reformer of Maharashtra, Vishnu Shastri

Pandit, translated it into Marathi. "Like Ishwar Chandra in Bengal, Vishnu Shastri was acting through the agency of the Widow Remarriage Association which was started in Bombay in the year 1866 and with the cooperation of several educated Indians advanced the cause of this movement".

Even though widow remarriage was legalized, there was no progress initially in its implementation in Maharashtra. In Vishnu Shastri, the Deccan found its Vidyasagar (Wamanrao Madhav Kolhatkar in *Indian Social Reform*—Ed. by C. Y. Chintamani). He took a vigorous initiative in introducing widow remarriage, in collaboration with Ranade, Telang and others. Ranade himself was the intellectual force behind the social reform movements in Maharashtra including the movement for the remarriage of widows and in his paper *Vedic authority for widow remarriage* (1870), follows more or less the same argument as followed by Vidyasagar on the basis of Parasara. Ranade pays a high tribute to Vidyasagar in the following words: "By his research and originality and the noble devotion of his life's best days and all that is prized in human possession to the promotion of this great emancipation of the women of his race, Pandit Ishwar Chandra has become a household name for all that is great and good in human nature throughout India and a potent influence for good in the ages to come." The noble efforts of Malabari for the prevention of enforced widowhood and child marriage also bore the impress of Vidyasagar's splendid endeavours in the field. He too followed Vidyasagar in invoking the aid of our rulers to put an end to these crippling social customs. While the social reform movement went on gaining momentum in Maharashtra, similar trends made themselves apparent in the south, where the widow

remarriage controversy cropped up as early as in 1869. Dewan Bahadur Raghunath Rao and Chentsal Rao criticised those who opposed it. The cause was taken up in earnest in 1879, and the first widow remarriage took place in the Presidency in 1880 under the auspices of a Telugu Brahmin, K. Veeresalingam Pantulu.

Not that all these efforts proved wholly successful. A different mood was coming over the country. It is interesting to notice that the same factor, namely, western education, produced two different effects on the people's mind. In the first instance, it introduced an element of western rationalism and created an urge for the reconstruction of the society on modern lines. Then a reaction set in. The same western education created in the mind of the people a sense of glory and pride in the country's past. A new attitude thus developed based on what may be called a rejection of the West and revival of the past. The mass appeal of the revivalist creed was great. It created a tremendous impression.

In politics its equivalent was extremism, as distinguished from liberalism. Extremism, which again was based in a large measure on a revival of the past and rejection of the West, made great strides throwing social reform into the background. It began to be contended that political reform must precede social reform which must take a back seat for the time being.

Vidyasagar occupied a unique position in the currents and cross-currents of the social reform controversy. He was not entirely westernized in outlook. At the same time, he was frankly unorthodox and never supported blind adherence to the Shastras. He even examined Shastric injunctions in the light of reason. That way he was a

rationalist, a balanced reformer, a solo reformer. Those were the days of the beginnings of liberal politics in India. In the social sphere, he was a liberal. He believed that social campaign was not enough, that legislation was necessary to put reform on a sound footing ; and he had no hesitation in asking for the help of the then rulers in the matter of Indian social reform. On this point he differed from the later schools of thought which would not have foreign rulers interfere in Indian social matters. Vidyasagar's approach was not based on a complete rejection of foreigners or foreign influence. It is interesting to note that Ranade too did not rule out state interference in social matters. Vidyasagar's approach was based on individual rationalism which is the hallmark of renaissance scholarship. Reform was no doubt in the air, was a part of the enlightened social conscience, at that time. But in Vidyasagar's unique personality it found a most magnificent flowering. He roused the social conscience of the country in such a manner that even though the cause received a temporary set-back, it could not be defeated in the end. Many-sided social reform movement went on vigorously *pari passu* the political movement. Gandhiji himself was one of the greatest social reformers. He was strongly opposed to child marriage and was a champion of the remarriage of widows in their teens.

C. H. Heimsath has remarked, "The widow remarriage movement forms a unique part of the history of Indian social reform." The women of free India have special reasons to look back with gratitude to that simple, unsophisticated Pandit from the till then obscure village of Birsingha. He was one of the greatest friends Indian women have ever had.

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